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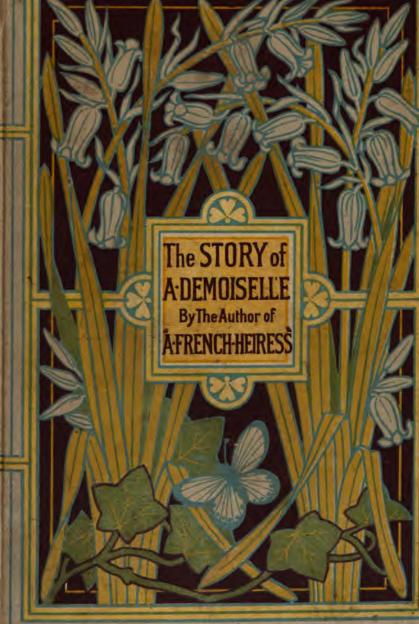
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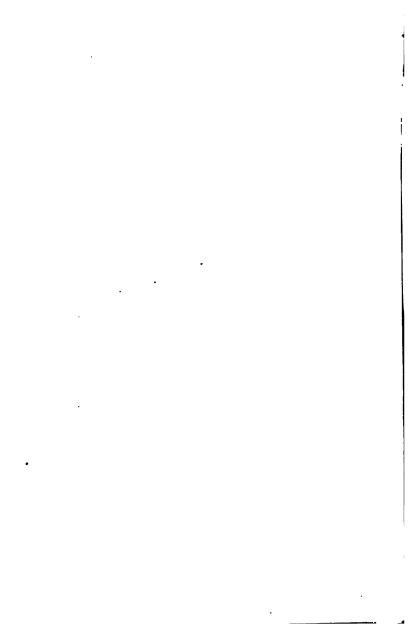
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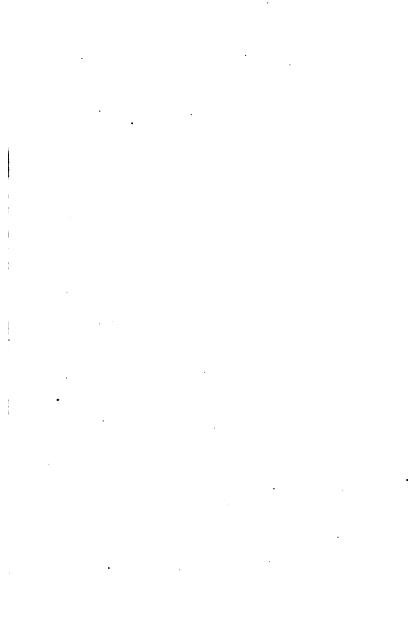
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STORY OF A DEMOISELLE







CLOTILDE AND ADELE .- p. 34.

THE

STORY OF A DEMOISELLE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"A FRENCH HEIRESS," "ONE ONLY," "CONSTANTIA,"
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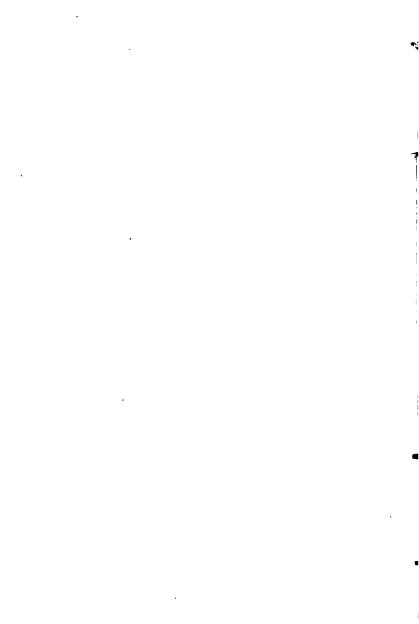
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THE STORY OF A DEMOISELLE.

CHAPTER I.

A MORNING RIDE.

HE Marquise de Champfort was riding one morning along the departmental road in the neighbourhood of her château. She

was a tall, upright woman of fifty, with a handsome rigid face, and a great deal of frizzy black hair. Her bay horse was English, and very handsome; she managed him perfectly, and proceeded at a quick walk between the rows of poplars, followed at a few yards' distance by her grey-headed groom on another fine animal.

This was Madame de Champfort's daily exercise in the country, and during these rides she thought deeply, and arranged many things in her mind. Then she rode home to breakfast with her family and any visitors who might be staying at the château; and in the course of the day she wrote letters which often had serious consequences.

On the whole, it would seem that Madame de Champfort had not much to complain of in life. Her sons were promising young men, and she had arranged a splendid marriage for her eldest daughter with the Marquis du Château Mont d'Or, one of the greatest matches in France. It is true that this young marquise showed symptoms of being weary of life, and that her pretty face was gradually assuming a peevish expression, but she was very unreasonable not to be happy. All her friends envied her; they would have liked to possess her wealth, her position, her jewellery; and if all these could not be had without her husband, they would have accepted him too. Her mother never showed the slightest doubt of the success of this arrangement; anxiety about the future of Léontine was a thing of the past, and had never been very serious, owing to her pretty features and her docile temper. It was Thérèse, the younger one, who occupied Madame de Champfort's mind that summer morning. Thérèse, through her cross, unhealthy childhood, her sharp-tongued, angular youth, had always been a trial to her family. In the last two or three years, however, things had altered for the better; the superhuman pains taken by her

mother, her governess, her femme-de-chambre, had resulted in great improvements. Her corners filled in; she learned to hold herself, to walk, and to dance, though no human power could make her graceful. She was very clever, original, and lively. Her sharp speeches were still frequently disagreeable, but they began to pass for wit. On the whole, her mother flattered herself that Thérèse was growing into an agreeable woman. She must always be plain, but there was something piquante in her looks, and by the strictest attention to becoming dress she really might be passable.

In Paris, in the spring of that same year, Madame de Champfort had been particularly pleased at the verdict of the old Comtesse de Lagny, who found Thérèse amusing and sensible. This lady went on to assure herself that the girl would have a good dowry, and finally brought forward her grandson, and formally proposed him to Madame de Champfort as a match for her daughter. All the preliminary business was gone through, and one beautiful afternoon in May the families met in the Tuileries gardens, where Philippe and Thérèse were to be allowed to walk together for ten minutes under the blooming chestnuts, in sight, but just out of hearing, of their respective relations. Philippe was young and dull and shy; perhaps Thérèse teased him; at any rate he

took a violent dislike to her; and at the same time, in the group of relations, his aunt perceived that one of the young lady's shoulders was a little higher than the other. These were the real reasons—though less personal ones were of course given to the world-which made the Lagny family draw back in haste from their bargain. Mademoiselle Thérèse had the impropriety to laugh, and declare that she was glad, for Monsieur Philippe had reminded her of nothing but a sheep. Her mother gave out that she had had very great misgivings, knowing that the pedigree of the Lagnys was not all that it should be-also, that they had behaved with the most odious meanness with regard to the "dot." But in reality her heart sank within her. She took Thérèse to Trouville, and brought her down to Champfort, in a state of mind bordering on despair. But nobody knew this except her confessor, who did his best to comfort her, saying that it was only a passing trouble, and that very likely this fiasco was all for the best.

There'se herself had begun to say that she would never marry; but her mother was firmly determined that she should, and all the more in consequence of this disappointment. The person was not yet fixed upon, but it was with this business that Madame de Champfort's active mind was employed as she took her morning ride that day.

A secondary subject of interest was the marriage of her friend the Vicomte de Vaux, who was now staying at Champfort, and who only yesterday had told her that he wished to marry, and begged her to find him a wife. This was rather a puzzling commission, for the Vicomte had no personal attractions. He was a middle-aged man of moderate fortune, and without any landed property. He had nothing but his fine old name, which might have been a bait to girls of inferior family-but the Vicomte would have none of these. She must be well born, and well brought up. If there was any land—an old château -belonging to her family, which could be had, he would like nothing better, and would at once invest his money in farming. So said Adrien de Vaux, who a few years before had ridden in the brilliant charge of the Chasseurs d'Afrique at Balaclava, to save the remnant of the English Light Brigade from destruction.

Madame de Champfort was so well accustomed to make matches for her friends, that it was not likely she would fail in this case, if only she had time to think about it; but just now her thoughts were so intent upon a match for Thérèse, that M. de Vaux was likely to find himself set aside. That very morning she had had an idea; somebody had flashed across her mind, young, rich, and slightly connected

with her own family. There were drawbacks; but they might possibly be got over. At least Madame de Champfort thought she would like to see the young man before deciding that he was out of the question. And suddenly—one more instance of the happy fate that often favoured her efforts—this very person came walking at a great pace along the road, and flourished off his hat from a fine head of curly auburn hair. He was afraid that Madame de Champfort would not remember him; but he could never forget her kindness to him as a boy; might he present himself once more—René de la Laurière!

"I was thinking of you at this moment," said Madame de Champfort, graciously giving him her hand, which he kissed.

"Is it possible, madame! You make me very happy."

"Come, Monsieur René," said the Marquise, with a smile, "you have not forgotten your good manners in that barbarous country."

"Ah, madame! But I assure you that, next to France, it is the finest country in the world. If you would but go there, and see for yourself!"

"Cross that frightful sea—merci! But when did you return? Are you at La Girouette? and how is it that you have not been to visit me?" "Madame, on leaving England I went straight to La Laurière, to see my father and mother. I only came to La Girouette the day before yesterday. Yesterday I was obliged to go to Mornay-le-Haut, to take some papers to M. de Mornay from my father—papers belonging to La Girouette. To-day I had promised myself the honour and pleasure of going to Champfort."

"You were on your way there now?"

"At this hour, madame! No, indeed. I was only taking a walk."

"You are very welcome at any hour. As I have met you, come and dine with us this evening. M. de Champfort will be charmed to see you."

René accepted this invitation with great readiness, and went on to make polite enquiries for M. de Champfort. Everything was said, and the Marquise was about to ride on, when a question occurred to her.

"I have not seen poor Monsieur de Mornay for months. I hope you found him well?"

"He seemed well enough," said René. "I saw him, and his charming grand-daughters. I remembered Mademoiselle Clotilde—but how she is changed! She was always a lovely child: now she is beautiful as an angel."

"You astonish me," said Madame de Champfort.

" If she was in England, everyone would fall in love

with her. Ah, madame, in that respect the English arrangements are better than ours."

"You have brought back that prejudice!" said Madame de Champfort, smiling, and gazing with some earnestness at his eager young face.

"Prejudice, do you call it, madame! It is the truth, and French people will find it out some day."

"Not just yet, I think. Well, monsieur le prophète," said the Marquise, playfully, "I must wish you good-day. We shall meet again in the evening, and then I shall have much pleasure in listening to all your English ideas. You are a revolutionist; you are going to overturn society. Very well!"

After she had parted with young De la Laurière, and was riding slowly on, Madame de Champfort came to several conclusions. These sprang naturally from the first one—that he was extremely comme-ilfaut, and that her idea was far from being unreasonable, and might as well be put in practice.

"He has his poor mother's eyes and hair," reflected Madame de Champfort, "but too much spirit and ambition, I fancy, to disgrace himself as she did. But this angelic beauty—there may be some danger there. How stupid I am, not to have thought of that before. The very person!"

She pulled up and beckoned to the groom, who rode up to her at once.

- "How long will it take, Félicien, to ride from here to the Château de Mornay?"
- "At a fair trot, Madame la Marquise will be there in twenty minutes."

"And what is the time now? Ten? We will go, then. I wish particularly to see M. de Mornay."

She put her horse into a canter, which soon became almost a gallop, as they flew along the smooth, green margin of the road. Félicien followed at his usual distance.

It might have been an affair of life and death that took them in such breathless haste to the Château de Mornay. As to that, so it was. But the present cause of hurry was the punctual breakfast-hour at Champfort.





CHAPTER II.

MONSIEUR DE MORNAY.

THE Château de Mornay—or Mornay-le-Haut, as people called it, to distinguish it from the other Mornay in the valley beneath—was a curious old place that had once been fortified. It crowned the top of a high green hill, on whose sides there were still to be seen remnants of walls and round towers; but most of the stones had been carried away from these defences for building in the neighbourhood. was a lonely, hilly, silent corner of the west of France. On every side but one the high ground went undulating away into an uncultivated moorland country, where gorse and heather covered the ground, while half round the horizon lay the long black line of a forest. On the top of the hill, close to the château, there was a walled stable-yard, with a high arched gateway; there was also a walled garden with vegetables in it, and fruit trees too old to bear. On the south face of the hill, under that front of the house, the ground had been made into two broad terraces; the upper one gravelled and ornamented with scarlet geraniums and orange trees in green tubs, the lower one rather wild and scrubby grass, with a great old cedar at its left-hand corner, the only tree about the place.

The house itself looked as if it had stood the storms and attacks of many hundred years, and was ready to face as many more. It was built of the white "falaise" of the country, stained with damp and mosses. The ridges of its peaked towers, and of all its tall grey roofs, were ornamented with iron-work, blossoming here and there into a gilded weathercock. The walls sloped slightly outwards to their foot, which gave an air of solid firmness to the whole grand, fantastic old place. It looked down southward upon a pretty valley full of trees, where the road ran, and the little river that turned the mill; where the village church and houses clustered in their warm nook.

Just at the foot of the château hill there were farmbuildings which belonged to M. de Mornay; his few cows and sheep had their home there, and the oxen that ploughed his fields. But everything that belonged to him had a tumble-down, desolate air. The road to the château passed by these buildings, and crept winding up the side of the hill till it reached the very top, where one branch of it, all ruts and stones, turned into the stable-yard, and the other joined itself to the highest of the terraces. There were no gates, no enclosures, except the walled yard and garden. In hard winters the wolves had been known to come at night from the forest, across the wild open hills, and prowl about howling on the terraces, under the windows of the château. Then the youngest of those orphan girls would wake and cry in terror for her sister, and Clotilde would steal across the cold floor and take her in her arms and comfort her, reminding her that after all there was a Mother watching over them.

But old Mornay was a happy place in summer, and the children had no idea of anything better than their life there. It could not have looked more grand and peaceful, if not cheerful, than it did that summer morning, when Madame de Champfort came cantering up the hill.

Old Athanase, the valet-de-chambre, who was valet, butler, housemaid, everything, appeared in shirt-sleeves and apron and slippers, with a broom in his hand; unfortunately, he was sweeping the hall just as Madame la Marquise rode up. His shock of grey hair was all standing on end, and he looked like an old "chiffonnier," but he was not in the least out of countenance.

"Am I too early?" said the Marquise. "Or is M. de Mornay visible?"

"But certainly, madame. Monsieur le Comte is in the library among his manuscripts, as usual. I can assure Madame la Marquise that he has been there since eight o'clock. I am charmed that madame should interrupt him."

"Ah! he studies too much; he always did. You should persuade him to take a walk or a ride, Athanase, on such a beautiful morning."

"I, Madame! I persuade! M. le Comte is incurable. He listens to nothing—he thinks of nothing but that accursed book. If it could ever be finished! But it never will. As soon as M. le Comte has written a chapter, he takes a disgust to it, and tears it up. I have often found the torn sheets on the floor. I have pieced them together and read them. What genius! what language! A thousand pardons for detaining Madame la Marquise with my foolish chatter!"

"It gives me much pleasure to talk to you, my good Athanase," answered Madame de Champfort.
"But I am a little hurried this morning, it is true."

Athanase bowed politely, marched across the spotless flags of the hall, and flung open a door, announcing in a loud voice, "Madame la Marquise de Champfort."

The Comte de Mornay was almost as odd a figure

as his valet-de-chambre, immensely tall and thin, his velvet coat threadbare, his long grey hair almost reaching to his shoulders. The room he was sitting in did Athanase credit: there was not a speck of dust to be seen, and the floor was polished to brilliancy. Only round the table in one of the high windows, at which the Comte was sitting, his torn papers lay scattered like a little snowstorm. From between the tall bookcases, family portraits looked down sorrowfully, as it seemed, at their poor old descendant. Two of them, one on each side of the fire-place, were the saddest of all; they were both young men in uniform, and the fashion of this, besides their strong likeness to M. de Mornay, showed that they were his sons.

M. de Mornay received his neighbour with the greatest politeness; no courtier, no prince, could have had more ceremonious manners. He handed her to his largest arm-chair, and seemed to forget everything else in the wish to make himself agreeable. They talked a little about Paris and the Emperor—this was in the year 1861—but Madame de Champfort determined not to go too far into politics, warned by the cynical curl of her old friend's lip, and the slight movement of his shoulders, that he was likely to begin on governments in general, and then the end, she knew, would be very far off. So she went

on to ask about his grand-daughters, Clotilde and Adèle.

"They are very well," said the Comte. "Clotilde, I believe, is growing into a woman. Adèle seems amusing. I hear her laughing in the distance. They go about hand in hand, as children should."

"And they have their good governess still—Mademoiselle Jourdain?"

"Certainly, thank heaven. The establishment would come off badly without the excellent Jourdain. She manages the farm, she orders dinner, she teaches the girls, she pays the labourers. She and Athanase are the two pillars on which we rest. I have no time to think of these things. My book must be ready before this Government succeeds in ruining itself. Then will come a moment of anarchy. My book appears, and all reasonable men are convinced by it."

The Comte smiled, and glanced at his pile of papers. Madame de Champfort could not be so rude as to show no interest in this absorbing subject of his.

"And what is to be the title of your book, dear Monsieur?" she said. "I fear I ought not to approve of it, but for your sake I must wish it success."

"My view is," said M. de Mornay, "that we can only judge of things by their results. My book describes, with exactness, every kind of government that has been known to exist on the globe—not only

every kind, but every development of that kind. The title is a difficulty, Madame."

"But it must be a kind of universal history!" said the Marquise, lifting up her hands. "What an astonishing task! What stores of learning! But if I remember right, monsieur, you decide in favour of a republic."

"I myself, madame, take no side; I write impartially; I leave my readers to draw their own inference from the facts. I may think, on the whole, with all respect to you and your noble party, that a republic would be best for France—but I have no wish for political agitation. If it ever comes, it must come of itself—gently, irresistibly, like the march of great seas and continents. I was talking yesterday to young De la Laurière. He is an intelligent lad. He was not disinclined to adopt my view, though at present English institutions are everything with him. And, by-the-bye, there are points in English law which I must ask him to explain to me. You have heard, madame, of my selling La Girouette to his father?"

The quick glance that the old man cast at Madame de Champfort was almost piteous. He seemed to feel that she might despise him for selling the best and most civilised part of his property, the pretty little shooting-box that his grandfather had built. But Madame de Champfort had no thought of this kind.

"You were very wise," she said—"if I may give my opinion. La Girouette was of no use to you—at such a distance from Mornay. And you never cared for it, letting it for all those years to our old aunt."

"It is very true," said M. de Mornay. "Let it go! Men like Lyon de la Laurière buy up everything. In a few years, perhaps, Mornay itself will be sold. Then you will have some new De Mornays in the neighbourhood—if he has the courage to take the name—one of our speculators, our notaries, our Imperialist gentlemen. Ah! it will not matter to me then."

His eyes were wandering back to the papers on the table. Madame de Champfort hastened to seize the opportunity which presented itself.

"Our families have been friends for so long, my dear monsieur," she said, leaning forward, and gently tapping his arm with her riding-whip, "that I am sure you will forgive what I am going to say. I am going to presume to offer my poor advice, my assistance, in an affair which must be a great trouble to you. I always remember with pleasure the part I took in your daughter's happy marriage. Is it not time that Clotilde's marriage was thought of? You tell me yourself that she is becoming a woman. Others tell me that she is beautiful."

"Beautiful! No, they flatter her," said the Comte, shaking his head; "she is too like her mother for that. You remember her, poor creature?—the twilight hour, Henri used to call her, when he imagined himself in love with her. What folly! Now Lila, Adèle's mother, was all sparkle and beauty. How she used to flash into this room, and disarrange my papers, only seven years ago! Marry Clotilde, dear madame? You are goodness itself, but I hardly know how that is to be managed. Her 'dot' will be too small for anyone worth having."

"Permit me to tell you what ought to be arranged for Clotilde," said Madame de Champfort. ought to marry a person with quiet tastes, of a reasonable income, who would not expect too much from her. The best thing in the world would be for him to be satisfied with Clotilde's prospective share of the Mornay property as her 'dot,' and to enter into an arrangement with your daughter, and with Adèle, to become possessed of their shares also-of course many years hence. You will pardon my talking in this dry, business-like fashion, dear monsieur. But it appears to me that your daughter and M. de Belleville would never live here—they are true Parisians. You would by this means ensure a home for Adèle, with the sister she loves so much-your fine old chateau would remain in the family-and

Clotilde's husband could not fail to be a comfort to you, in managing the property, and keeping up the importance of Mornay in the neighbourhood. He need not be a very rich man to do that successfully. Your two present pillars will not stand for ever, good as they are."

"All that you say is true, madame, and your plan is excellent," answered the Comte, gravely. "But where are we to find the man who will care to devote himself to an old ruinous place like this, with so many hectares of moor and forest and stone-quarry?"

"I have an idea that he is found already," said Madame de Champfort, nodding and smiling. "But I can mention no name at present. I may ask you to trust me, and to leave Clotilde's future, as you did Madame de Belleville's, entirely in my hands."

"It could not be in better or kinder hands," said M. de Mornay. "Clotilde should know you, madame, and thank you herself."

"I certainly must improve my acquaintance with her, but not to-day, for I am a little hurried. Ah! I had forgotten—we expect the Bishop at Champfort next Sunday. Will you allow Mademoiselle Jourdain to bring her to us for the occasion?"

M. de Mornay accepted the invitation readily, but in such an absent manner that the Marquise was not sure that he had understood it. "I must write and fix the hour," she said; and then she got up and wished him good-bye.

He came out with her into the sunshine, and put her on her horse, and walked beside her to the end of the terrace, and then they waved their hands politely to each other as she turned to go down the hill. She rode homewards at a great pace, and in very good spirits.

M. de Mornay, on his way back to his library, overtook Athanase in the hall.

"Listen, Athanase," he said. "If you ever let a lady in again when I am in the very middle of an important paragraph, it will be as much as your place is worth. You have done your small part towards ruining France."

"Monsieur le Comte will write all the better, now that he is roused a little," said Athanase. "Sparks will fly from his pen; he will make Paris echo one of these days. Ah! his old servants will rejoice when that time comes."

"Hardly those who interrupt me now," said M. de Mornay. "A whole morning spent in gossip about nothing! it is insupportable."

"The breakfast-bell is just beginning to ring," said Athanase; but the Comte took no notice. He went into the library and shut the door.



CHAPTER III.

THE HISTORY OF RENÉ.

THERE was once a René de Champfort, nephew of the then Marquis, who, being born just before the great Revolution, was taken by his emigrant parents to England as a little child. His childhood in England was so happy that he always retained a strong affection for the country where he was brought up, and as his father and mother died while he was still quite young, he spent most of his youth with their English friends, and ended by marrying a penniless Englishwoman. She too died very soon, leaving him with one little girl.

M. René de Champfort was now seized with a longing for his own country and his own relations. He went back to them, but was not received with any great kindness. His marrying a foreigner, for love and poverty, was a proceeding too foolish and

ill-bred. The Champforts, who had recovered their old château and most of their estates, did not want relations of this kind. The only one among them who welcomed René and his child was Mademoiselle de Champfort, his aunt-a great oddity, who had refused to marry, and spent her life doing good to the poor. When poor René died, which he did very soon, half broken-hearted at the coldness of his relations, this lady took his little Marie at once into her care. For some time they went on living with the old Marquis, her brother, at Champfort; but when he died, and his son succeeded him, the aunt found that it would be better to make a separate establishment. She therefore took La Girouette. M. de Mornay's shooting-box, and there she lived for years with her great-niece Marie. It was a pretty little place among open fields and beech-glades, a "gentilhommière," or small representative of a château, with its tower, that marked the residence of noble blood. and its great gilded weathercock-also, I believe. an ancient privilege of the noblesse. Here Mademoiselle de Champfort received a good many odd people, for she connected herself with charitable societies, not all of them of the most orthodox opinions. She was, in fact, a very peculiar person. who thought for herself, and was the despair of the curé, and of her devout relations at Champfort.

Owing partly to her aunt's character, and partly to her own want of fortune, Marie de Champfort grew up, pretty and amiable as she was, without any proposals of marriage. She lived on with her aunt at La Girouette till Mademoiselle de Champfort died in 1838. Marie was then about six-and-twenty. Her cousin, the Marquise, then a young married woman, invited her of course to spend most of her time at the château. The rest was to be bestowed on a Paris convent. But in a very few months Marie informed her horrified relations that she was going to be married to M. César Lyon de la Laurière.

The father of this young man was nothing more or less than a citizen of Paris, Lyon by name, who had made an enormous fortune, and had bought the Château de la Laurière, about forty miles from Champfort. His charities were very great, and by their means he had made acquaintance with Mademoiselle de Champfort. He had even come once to La Girouette, and had brought his only son César with him. César, being of a romantic turn, and having also spent some months in England, became hopelessly in love with Marie de Champfort, whom he saw for five minutes, and whose deep blue eyes. golden hair, and air of graceful sadness, might have touched a much harder heart. He gave his father no peace; he would listen to no objections, no impossi-

bilities. Old Lyon was practical, but he had a weakness for nobility, and he liked to hear his son called "De la Laurière." He was, however, afraid to come forward as long as Mademoiselle de Champfort lived, knowing very well that, with all her frankness and independence, she was as proud as the rest of them. But after she was dead, he took the strong measure of writing to Mademoiselle Marie, and laying at her feet the Château de la Laurière, several millions of francs, and his son's devoted adoration. Marie received this letter in Paris, as she walked one morning in the garden of her convent. She thought herself alone, but the next instant M. César himself sprang from a thicket of shrubs, and fell on his knees before her. imploring her to listen to his affection, and not to the etiquette preached by her relations. How he got into the sacred garden nobody ever knew, but there he was. On one side were love, riches, and liberty: on the other, family pride, monotony, and dependence on relations who, except the present Marquise, had never been kind. Marie made her choice. Champforts were in a tremendous rage, especially those who had never taken any notice of her at all: but she quietly ignored their clamour, and married her bourgeois in spite of them. He was a fine young fellow, clever and well-educated. Madame de la Laurière did not repent of her condescension. She

called her only son René, after the father she hardly remembered, and sent him, when he was fifteen, to a tutor in England. Her husband heartily agreed with her in this step, for he thought the English a fine people, and had learned a great deal in his various visits to England.

Perhaps it was not unnatural that Madame de la Laurière's heart should still cling to her own relations, especially as the most valued of them had forgiven her after a time, though of course they could never regard her as quite one of themselves. She was particularly anxious that René, when he came home finally from England, should take his place on equal terms amongst them. She could not help inspiring him with a certain horror of his Lyon relations. René must marry into her rank of life, and then she felt she would be quite happy; no one could reproach her any more. So she eagerly encouraged her husband in his purchase of La Girouette, when M. de Mornay wished to sell it. She had her own old associations with the little place, and it had the great advantage of being near Champfort. It was to be a present for René, his first independent possession; there, among all the old neighbours, he would take his right place at once.

Madame de Champfort was quite aware of her poor cousin's weakness, and knew that such an arrangement

as René's marriage with Thérèse would seem to his mother the fulfilment of all her wishes. She knew also that the initiative must come from herself. Madame de la Laurière would never venture to propose that her son, a Lyon, should marry the daughter of the Marquis de Champfort.

This was René's position, and these were his relations. His future life, apparently, was on the point of being arranged for him. Such arrangements are all very well in their way, but a young man whose father and grandfather both married for love is perhaps less likely than most to be a fit subject for them. Yet René was a Frenchman, and there was the old weight of custom to be thrown off—

"A weight Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life."





CHAPTER IV.

CLOTILDE AND ADÈLE.

"I MUST leave you, young ladies," said Mademoiselle Jourdain. "It is necessary for me to speak to the shepherdess, who is without exception the most wicked and disobliging old woman in the department. She knows that it is ruin to her master's sheep to bring them out in the hot sun. Of course, therefore, they are crossing the field at this moment."

"Ah, let me go with you, mademoiselle!" cried Adèle, springing to her feet.

"No, my child. Stay here with your sister, finish your reading, and then converse reasonably till I come back. This blazing sun is too hot for anybody."

Mademoiselle Jourdain was a tall, ponderous woman, with a square brown face, and black hair

growing low on her forehead. She was dressed in an ugly blue print gown and a black straw hat. She talked fast and gravely.

It was a trying thing to leave her seat in the deep shade of the cedar, and the soothing influence of a chapter of French history, to hurry down the bare hill-side in pursuit of the distant flock of sheep. which her quick eyes had caught sight of through a gap in the branches. But it was a thing that happened nearly every day. After all, the shepherdess was not much worse than the pig-woman, and the cow-woman was sometimes the least agreeable of the three. The shepherdess, being the oldest and smallest, was the easiest to scold. Not that Mademoiselle Jourdain ever thought of her own ease, for she was one of those women with an utter devotion to duty, of whom France, fortunately for her, possesses so many. She was gone, and the two Demoiselles de Mornay were left alone under their dark green roof. Clotilde sat on a little camp-stool, and went on reading aloud, in a soft voice, the story of Joan of Arc. Adèle sat on the ground, her feet stretched out, her lovely head with its wild black curls thrown back against her sister's knees, her large dark eyes staring up into the cedar. She was only eight years old, and Clotilde was eighteen.

When poor Henri de Mornay died, seven years

before, just after the death of his second wife, he had told Clotilde that she must be Adèle's little mother. Clotilde, with her grave gentleness, had accepted the charge, and from that day to this the two children had never been parted for an hour. That was the time of terrible grief at Mornay. Lila died first, the young Vicomtesse; then Bertrand, the Comte's second son, before Sebastopol; then the Vicomte Henri himself. The house was left desolate, and then it was that everything began to fall into decay. At this time Mademoiselle Jourdain came to Mornay to take charge of the orphan children, and very soon, by degrees, the management of all the affairs fell into her hands. She and Athanase were deadly enemies at first, but fought themselves into friendship, and became, as M. de Mornay said, the two pillars of the establishment.

Clotilde grew up gentle, obedient, and reasonable to an almost provoking degree. Mademoiselle Jourdain loved her deeply, and yet could not help being impatient sometimes with the too faultless child. But a sharp word to Clotilde always raised such a storm of passion in Adèle, who from a baby had been her sister's fierce defender, that mademoiselle felt obliged to confine her scoldings to Adèle herself, who often deserved them, and was not troubled by them at all.

Many people might have been puzzled by René de la Laurière's enthusiasm for Clotilde. There was nothing brilliant about her, but a soft, faint duskiness which did remind one of twilight. Her complexion was brown, clear, and pale; there was hardly a tinge of colour in her cheeks, which yet had the delicate bloom and soft firmness of youth and health. Her eyes were nearly the same colour as her fine hazelbrown hair. She had grown every day taller and more graceful, and with all her retiring gentleness there was an air of nobility. Any beauty that she had was plainly not the "beauté de diable" which some people admire. It was what belongs to angels, and so far René was right.

"Clotilde, let me go and fetch Nico!" said Adèle, when the chapter was done.

"But mademoiselle said you were to stay here, little one. The sun is too hot for you to run about."

"I love the sun—but I don't want to run about. I only want to go out on the terrace for a moment, where he can see me, and call 'Nico, Nico.' He does not know where we are. My little dear, let me go."

She stood up, a wild little gipsy figure, in a washedout crumpled frock, and an old torn straw hat, her long curls falling over her shoulders, and the sweetest, most persuading smile on her face.

"One little minute!" she said. "Kiss me, sweet,

and let me just run out and call him—I want him—I am dull—not really dull with you, unless you are reading history—but it is so hot, and so long!"

Clotilde threw her arms round the child, and kissed both her blooming cheeks.

"Well, one little minute, then. But come back, for I have done the history now, and I want you."

Adèle skipped out into the sunshine. Her silver voice went calling along the terrace-" Nico-Nico!" and then was silent. Clotilde did not notice the silence, for she was thinking of Joan of Arc, whether it would have been nice to be a woman like that. Not altogether, perhaps, sublime as she was. Too much fighting-and then that dreadful death! Clotilde had a taste, almost a morbid one, for saints and martyrs, but she liked them of a more distinctly spiritual kind. It was better to conquer one's own self than an army of enemies, she thought, here unconsciously taking an idea from Solomon. Most of her solitary thoughts took a religious turn; she already dreamed of a convent, when Adèle could do without her. But certainly not till then, for the care of Adèle was a religious duty.

She was wrapped in these dreams when Nico, the poodle, rushed in from the terrace and jumped upon her. Then came Adèle's voice, closely following—

"Shall I show you the way into our house? This is where we live all day in summer."

Adèle came into the shade with a dancing step, followed by somebody who had to stoop under the sweeping cedar branches. It was René de la Laurière, who had paid his visit to the château a few days before, and had been brought in by M. de Mornay to breakfast with his family. But what business had he here now? This was what Clotilde asked herself, as she got up and made him a grave little inclination.

"Do you want to see my grandpapa, monsieur?" she said. "He is in the house."

René coloured slightly. He was not accustomed to be sent by English young ladies to their grand-papas.

"Pray, forgive me, mademoiselle," he said. "I was making my way up the steepest pitch of the hill, it seemed so much shorter than the road, when I saw mademoiselle your sister with her dog on the terrace. So I climbed up the shortest way, having no idea that I should intrude upon you. Shall I interrupt M. de Mornay if I go to the house now?"

"Not at all, I think," said Clotilde. "He has some question to ask you, I believe, about English law."

"I am afraid he could not ask a worse person. But I shall be happy to do my best. What a charming shelter you have here! I remember it years ago."

"Monsieur," said Adèle, with her most bewitching smile, "have the goodness to sit down here, and finish that charming story you were telling me the other day."

René looked at Clotilde, and so did Adèle, with imploring eyes. There was Mademoiselle Jourdain's empty chair, and her journey up the broiling hill would not be accomplished very soon.

Clotilde smiled a little, gracefully motioned René to the chair, and sat down again herself on her campstool.

"Don't you remember?" said Adèle, with eager, wide-open eyes. "The giant had just picked the house up, and was carrying it away on his shoulder. Ah! how delicious!"

"Yes, poor little house," said René, laughing.

"Think how the chairs and tables must have rolled about—worse than in an earthquake. We will go on with it directly, mademoiselle—but may not we talk a little first? If you knew what it was to be all alone at La Girouette, with no one to speak to."

"But you must have so much time for thinking of stories!" exclaimed Adèle.

She was sitting at her sister's feet, with one arm round Nico's curly neck, her smiling face turned towards René. He was quite happy and contented. To be near Mademoiselle de Mornay—to see her smiling too, as if his presence did not annoy her—was just now enough for him.

"You think of nothing but stories, little one," said Clotilde. "You will fatigue Monsieur de la Laurière. But you like La Girouette, monsieur, though it is lonely?" she said, half shyly, lifting her eyes to René's.

"I adore it, mademoiselle. It is near Mornay, and—it is near Champfort. I dined there last Tuesday. We had a very agreeable evening. They are my mother's relations, you know. Mademoiselle de Champfort asked me a thousand questions about you."

"Thérèse? We used to see each other sometimes. But she is very clever, is she not? And she has been so much occupied with her education."

"I suppose that is finished now," said René. "Yes, she is very clever and lively and amusing. Madame her mother was good enough to let us have a long talk together. It was almost entirely about you."

"You are very amiable," said Clotilde, with a little bend of her head.

"I also told Mademoiselle Thérèse something about life in England," René continued. "Then some of the other ladies began to listen; they were so much astonished. What would you think now, mademoiselle, of young English ladies being allowed to travel by railway without maids, of their walking out alone, of their having almost as much liberty as married ladies in France."

"But is it possible?" said Clotilde.

"I assure you it is the truth. There are other things, too, in which their freedom is beautiful, enchanting. The ladies at Champfort seemed a little scandalised at some things that I told them, so I will not venture to repeat them to you. But the fashion in which people eat in England would astonish you. This is the sort of thing—great breakfast at nine, great luncheon in the middle of the day, tea and all sorts of cakes at five, dinner perhaps at eight. They are wonderful people, the English."

"Oh, that is amusing!" cried Adèle. "They eat, eat, all day. One, two, three, four," and she counted the meals on her fingers. "They must be very fat and strong."

René laughed. "I do not know," he said. "I like some of their ways. They are grand people—they have a great deal of good sense."

"But you do not like England better than France, monsieur?" said Clotilde.

"No, mademoiselle. I am not such a traitor. But

I de think some of their customs are better than ours. I cannot exactly explain to you which."

- "The four great meals, without doubt!" said Adèle, solemnly.
- "Hush, petite!" said Clotilde, bending over her, and blushing crimson while she smiled.
- "Oh, mademoiselle! how cruel of you to hit upon my weakness!" exclaimed René.

He was beginning to feel rather unreasonable. Poor Clotilde would never have dreamed of such a thing, but every look, every word, every movement of hers was plunging this unfortunate young man into a deeper whirlpool. He was very grateful for the unexpected good fortune of sitting here beside her for a few minutes; it was a reward for his walk that he could not have dared to expect—but what next? Would it be possible to sit here for ten minutes longer, and talk like a rational, indifferent man?

As for Clotilde, she thought that Adèle was a little impertinent, and that the subject had better be changed. So she looked at René and said, "I shall see Thérèse de Champfort to-morrow. We are going with our governess to the reception of the Bishop."

"Are you?" said René. "I shall go too. Madame de Champfort gave me a general invitation; she is

kindness itself. You are both going? What happiness! Mademoiselle Thérèse will be delighted."

Perhaps twenty minutes had been spent in this manner, the giant with the house on his shoulder having proceeded no farther on his journey, when Mademoiselle Jourdain came back from her farming duties to find a young man established in her chair under the tree. The grave stiffness of her manner warned René that his visit had better end. Adèle was allowed to take him to the house, and announce him to M. de Mornay.

- "I am so glad you are going to Champfort tomorrow," she confided to him, as they climbed together to the upper terrace.
- "A thousand thanks, mademoiselle. Do you think mademoiselle your sister is at all glad too?"
- "Clotilde? Oh, I don't know. Ought she to be glad?"
- "I am afraid I can hardly answer that question," hesitated René.
- "Because she always does what she ought. So if she ought to be glad, she is glad, do you see! But if you want to know, I can ask her."
- "No, no, dear little mademoiselle, do not say a word, I implore you!" exclaimed René.
 - "Well, monsieur, as you please."

Clotilde, left alone with Mademoiselle Jourdain,

looked up at her rather anxiously. Her opinion was very soon given.

"It is not possible for me, then, to leave you for an instant, mademoiselle. The question now is, are you or the sheep of the most importance? On that subject I must consult monsieur your grandpapa. Pray explain—how did you come to invite that gentleman to take my place as your guardian?"

"Do not be angry, mademoiselle," said Clotilde; and she went on to explain how it happened. "He has been in England, and he is very agreeable," she ended, with some spirit. René's bright face and pleasant manner had an animating influence.

"No doubt! I heard all that the other day," said Mademoiselle Jourdain. "He must be reminded. however, that this is France, not England. What an idea! to sit out here with you, instead of paying his visit to monsieur your grandpapa. He has brought back odious manners from an odious country. Well! when I am forced to leave you again, you will either retire into the house, or old Babette will come out to sit with you. Heavens! if Madame de Champfort heard of such a thing, she would say I was not fit to have the charge of you. If it was to happen again, I should leave you, mademoiselle. The responsibility is too much; it breaks my heart."

Mademoiselle Jourdain leaned back in her usurped

chair, and pressed her hand on her heart with a groan.

"Oh no, dear mademoiselle! What should we do without you! It was only an accident," said Clotilde, affectionately.

"I do not believe in accidents," said mademoiselle, grimly. "It was a scandal, an impropriety, which no gentleman could have been guilty of. In M. de la Laurière, as he calls himself, it does not astonish me so much. Ah! Mademoiselle Adèle, come here, that I may scold you for your wickedness!"

"What have I done, mademoiselle? Did you drive back the sheep, in that long time you were away?"





CHAPTER V.

THE BISHOP.

MADAME DE CHAMPFORT was rather pleased than otherwise when René appeared at Champfort on Sunday. She treated him with affectionate ease, told him that, as her sons were away, he must take their place, and make himself useful to her, and introduced him in a pointed manner to several distinguished people as "our cousin, M. René de la Laurière." Handsome, well-dressed, and wellmannered, with a cheerful frankness not so much learned at Jesuit colleges, René was fast making his way among Madame de Champfort's friends. Perhaps the ladies liked him better than the gentlemen did, who, standing apart with their air of starched dignity, regarded the English-bred fellow as something of a mountebank. Most of them knew who his father was, and did not choose to consider him their equal merely because it pleased Madame de Champfort to take him up. Some of them wondered what she was going to do with him. But René was very happy, and did not care what they thought.

He went with the whole party to the railway station of the little town, which hundreds of working hands had transformed into a fairy-land of flowers and evergreens. The Bishop was to be received by the municipal authorities, was to bless the town from a little altar under a splendid triumphal arch just outside the station, and was then to walk up in grand procession to the church. All the Champfort people, in their gay Sunday clothes, were collected in the station-yard. The white caps were starched even more stiffly than usual, and stood up a wonderful mass of frills; the gold ornaments flashed and jingled. But the most splendid flashes came from the brass helmets of the "Sapeurs Pompiers," who were drawn up there with their band. Moving solemnly up came a procession of gorgeous clergy, with choir boys in scarlet and white; then a procession of girls in white, carrying banners-all to receive Monseigneur, and walk with him through the town.

Madame de Champfort and her guests were in an upper room of the station overlooking the gay scene. One of the last arrivals, the last that was allowed to drive up, was M. de Mornay's rickety old carriage and white horse.

"Here she is!" said René to himself, and he boiled with impatience, for it seemed as if he could not rush down stairs without orders from the Marquise, and she gave him none.

"Here she is!" said Madame de Champfort, in a smiling aside, but not to René, not to Thérèse—to a person who ought to have been quite uninterested in such an arrival. A short, broad, middle-aged man, with plain features, a thick black moustache touched with grey, and an air of grave, immovable, stolid dignity. He was standing close to Madame de Champfort, and he answered her remark with a bow.

Monsieur de Champfort, another silent, impenetrable-looking person, had met the Mornay party at the foot of the stairs, and now brought them into the room. Many eyes were turned upon them, for Monseigneur's train was late, and the interest of triumphal arches began to flag a little. Mademoiselle Jourdain looked responsible; Clotilde looked as she always did, only a little sweeter, in a pretty hat and feathers; Adèle's white embroidered frock and shady hat were perfection, and her bright eyes went dancing here and there.

Clotilde's solitary bringing-up had given her a shyness unusual with girls of her nation. She blushed a little under all these eyes, of which she first met Rene's, full of eager welcome. Then she made a low inclination to Madame de Champfort, who came forward and took her hand kindly.

"I am charmed to see you, my dear child—and your dear little sister too. Bon jour, mademoiselle. Therese, where are you? Come and talk to your friend."

Madame de Champfort, though she was a stern-looking woman, had a manner that conquered everything, especially with young people. It was kind, polite, protecting, to a girl like Clotilde; kind, gay, gracious, to a young man like René. Her strong will seemed to relax itself as she smiled on children like these, and they did not feel afraid of her.

The Comte de Mornay led such a recluse life that his grand-daughters knew nobody, but one or two ladies came and spoke to them, who had known Clotilde's mother or Adèle's. They went into raptures with Adèle's beauty, her eyes, her hair; the little lady enjoyed the fun, and was quite ready to chatter to them. Mademoiselle Jourdain looked on with a certain amount of disgust; she was not fond of flattery, and thought Adèle would be easily spoiled by it. As for Clotilde, she was taken possession of at once by Thérèse de Champfort, whose curious eyes had been watching her ever since she came into the room. Thérèse was certainly plain, but her continually changing face was most agreeable. She was

well dressed, and looked distinguished; she had a quick, lively manner and a pleasant voice.

"Come here, my dear," said she. "What a pretty hat! Your little sister is the most charming child I ever saw, but I detest children. What a little coquette she is! Look at her now, making her little faces at my cousin. She may as well amuse herself now, for she will find it dull enough by-and-by. See, if you stand in this corner, you will catch the very first sight of Monseigneur. That will give you great pleasure, I am sure. Tell me, do you know all the people in this room?"

"No; very few of them," said Clotilde, looking at her friend with some amusement.

"We will call each other Clotilde and Thérèse," said Mademoiselle de Champfort. "We will be great friends, and tell each other everything. I want a friend, and mamma says I may have you, because you are so quiet and well brought up. So if you do not like the arrangement, remember it is hers."

"I am charmed with it," said Clotilde. "Only I hope you will love Adèle."

"I cannot promise that as long as she is a child. But I will love you, and that is something. How fortunate that you are so pretty, my dear Clotilde. I hate ugly people, because I am so hideous myself."

"Oh no," began Clotilde; but Thérèse stopped her with a little wave of her hand.

"No flattery, if you please. When people are friends, they tell each other the truth. Let us talk of something more amusing. Do you see that little man with the black moustache standing near mamma? That is how he always stands, and he seldom speaks to anyone but mamma. When I try to speak to him he says, 'Oui, mademoiselle'—'C'est vrai, mademoiselle'—'Merci, mademoiselle.' He is a person of great imagination. René and I think he has been to some foreign university, and has taken his degree in silence. And yet it is wicked to laugh at him, for he has been a soldier, and was wounded at Balaclava."

"Who is he?" said Clotilde. "I never saw him before."

She had glanced at this man while Thérèse was speaking, and had met his eyes, steadily and thoughtfully regarding her.

"Oh, he is the Vicomte de Vaux."

The Bishop's train had that moment arrived; the band struck up, the church bells were ringing in the town. A few minutes later the procession filed off, the Bishop walking under a white and gold canopy carried by four men. The brass helmets and gay uniforms, the gorgeous vestments, the floating banners, the white dresses, the music and flowers, all went

hurrying away together under the broad sunshine. Madame de Champfort and her party hurried down after them, and took a short cut through side streets to the church. But a little of their way lay along the streets where the procession was to pass, and these were an avenue of fir branches planted in the pavement, while from end to end the houses were festooned with flowers and evergreens.

Madame de Champfort kept the girls safe under her own eye; they walked with her, while Mademoiselle Jourdain kept Adèle prisoner by the hand; the gentlemen of the party, among whom was René, loitered a little behind.

Clotilde was very happy, as she hurried along with her companions over the uneven, round stones of the streets. Madame de Champfort and the other ladies chattered unceasingly, while Thérèse made odd remarks aside in her friend's ear.

The church was very much decorated with gilding and colour; long bands of coloured paper, in wonderful combinations, went flying round from pillar to pillar underneath the fine old arches. Clotilde thought it all beautiful; she was in Paradise; such splendour as this was never to be seen in the little white church at Mornay. She was full of enthusiasm; her eyes filled with tears when a burst of opera music announced the entrance of the procession. But the

most exciting and touching part of the service, to her, was when she had to lead her little Adèle up to the chancel, to be blessed by the Bishop with all the other children. As they came down again to their place, many people looked at the sisters, and thought that Mademoiselle de Mornay had the eyes of a saint, while the child's gravity and awe were lovely from their very strangeness. One of these people, who gazed thus at faces utterly unconscious of them, and wondered at their beauty, was René de la Laurière; another was the Vicomte de Vaux.

Monseigneur went up into the pulpit, in his great gold mitre, and preached about self-sacrifice, and the vanity of this world. But he said a few words for life in the world, and pointed out how truly it could be a life of self-denial, and how some of the most spiritual people had given up their own inclinations, because they saw that duty led them into the common ways of life. Clotilde listened to every word of the sermon; René, who was sitting where he could just see her profile, did not hear it at all.

The Château de Champfort stood just outside the town, its broad entrance drive opening into one of the little paved squares; this one was very quiet, with trees planted round it, and tall, old houses in which respectable people lived. There was a private road from the church to the château, through the gardens;

Madame de Champfort's way to mass every morning. The château was a grand house, very much modernised, with splendid halls and saloons and a marble staircase. The upper rooms were scattered along endless corridors; there were suite after suite, occupied by the Marquis's many visitors; the owners of Champfort were among the great people of their province.

A great many people were collected that afternoon to see the Bishop, so that a better day could not have been chosen to introduce Mademoiselle de Mornay to the world. Everybody sat and stood in a great circle round the salon, while the Bishop, sometimes attended by his hostess, walked about and talked to one and He was a very popular Bishop, a fineanother. looking man, with pleasant manners. He looked picturesque and well in his present dress, a black soutane with red buttons, a long purple cloak and purple gloves. He cracked his jokes with everybody, and especially with the black curés who congregated in corners of the room, and who beamed with delight. the younger of them, when monseigneur patted their rosy cheeks and called them "mon cher." Madame de Champfort presented most of her lady guests to the Bishop, who had polite speeches for everybody. He remembered the poor Vicomte de Mornay and his brother, and his words to Clotilde and Adèle were so

kind, so tender, that he won both their hearts, if they needed any more winning.

"God bless you, my child," he said before he left them, laying his hand on Adèle's curls. "Mademoiselle," he added to the good Jourdain, "you are in charge of a precious treasure. These dear orphans how much must they expect from their friends, and especially from you."

"I wish and pray to do my duty by them, monseigneur," answered Mademoiselle Jourdain, gravely. "And they are good children."

"That they must be, from their faces," said the Bishop. Though he had, perhaps, most words for Adèle, his eyes rested with deep interest on Clotilde, and soon afterwards he said a few words to Madame de Champfort about her future. "Madame, that young lady would find her truest home in religion. Her face is full of spiritual aspiration."

"I believe, however," said Madame de Champfort, in a low voice, "that Monsieur de Mornay intends her to be married. To confide in you entirely, monseigneur, he is inclined to leave the arrangement in my hands."

"Indeed, madame! And may one ask—for I must feel deep interest in so plainly beautiful a character——"

"You see him standing there-my friend the

Vicomte de Vaux—the most excellent person—but this is in confidence, monseigneur. The affair is hardly yet begun."

"Ah!" said the Bishop. Possibly, having an eye for faces, he thought there was not much in the Vicomte's stolid countenance to match the spiritual beauty of Clotilde's. But he was used to these things, which were perhaps beyond his jurisdiction.

All this time René was prowling round the outside of the room, in a state of discontent that gradually approached rage. He could not get very near Clotilde, she was in the midst of so many people. Therese was sitting beside her, talking to her with great animation. Adèle stood with her arm on Clotilde's shoulder, rather silent and grave; Mademoiselle Jourdain, dark, square, in a black silk gown and a grand orange bonnet, kept guard over the group. René came up behind them; he did not dare to push himself in and speak to them, but he leaned in a melancholy manner against the wall not far off, and studied the soft coils of hair under Clotilde's hat, and the outline of her pale cheek. He almost wished he had stayed at La Girouette: what was the use of coming to Champfort for this! and then he repented of the miserable thought.

Suddenly Adèle looked round; their eyes met, and both faces brightened. René could not help giving a

little sign of invitation; he hardly knew whether the child would understand it, but she hardly wanted it, for the next moment she was standing by his side, looking up at him with the most fascinating expression of naughty fun.

"Everything is so sad," she whispered, "and there are so many curés. They have come from all round the world. Listen, monsieur; I am tired to death. I wish I was back at Mornay. Clotilde has forgotten me. She only cares to talk to that ugly Mademoiselle Thérèse. Do you see those two little chairs?"

"Certainly, mademoiselle. Would you like one of them?"

"Ah, very much, if you would like the other. Are you ennuye, like me, with all these cures and silly ladies? Then have the goodness to go on with that dear giant. All these days he has been carrying the little house away on his shoulder. I want him to stop. I am in despair."

"I am at your service," said René, smiling, "and so is the giant."

So he and Adèle sat down on the two little chairs, and, while the buzz of agreeable conversation went on all round them, had a delightful quarter of an hour of their own in fairy-land.

It may seem strange that Adèle's belongings did

not claim her at once; but it was impossible for the child to come to any harm in Madame de Champfort's salon, and their attention was engaged in another quarter. The Marquise came up to them with her silent friend, who all this time had been watching Clotilde from a distance.

"Mademoiselle, allow me to present to you one of my most intimate friends, M. le Vicomte de Vaux. He had the pleasure of knowing monsieur your uncle in the Crimea."

"You do not remember your uncle, mademoiselle," said M. de Vaux, in a quiet matter-of-fact voice.

"Yes, monsieur, indeed I do," said Clotilde, slightly injured at being supposed so young.

"Mademoiselle de Mornay is a grown-up person, monsieur," said Thérèse, "and it is only six or seven years since the Crimean war."

"That is true, mademoiselle."

Both the girls had a strong inclination to laugh. Even M. de Vaux smiled slightly, and there was a pleasant expression in his eyes as he looked at them.

"I have very agreeable recollections of your uncle," he said, after a pause. "He was one of the best officers in my regiment. Poor Bertrand! My wound at Balaclava prevented me from being with him at the last. I regretted him deeply. I had then no idea that I should ever be acquainted with his relations.

May I inquire, mademoiselle, for monsieur your grandfather?"

Clotilde said that he was very well, and then, drawn on by a certain sincerity and earnestness in M. de Vaux, she went on to say how terribly he had felt her uncle's death, and other troubles that had followed.

"Ah! I heard," said M. de Vaux. "I assure you that he had my sympathy."

The silent Vicomte seemed suddenly to have found his tongue; he went on discoursing in a grave, simple sort of way. Clotilde listened gently and courteously, answered his questions, and showed interest in his recollections of her uncle Bertrand and the war, and even in the reasons for his leaving the army. He told her a good deal about himself, without, apparently, thinking of himself; her answers, her opinions, seemed to be the chief interest to him. There'se became gradually silent, for the Vicomte evidently had nothing to say to her. She watched and listened, however, with a wondering satirical smile, which faded away as a discovery began to dawn upon her; but of that she said nothing.

After some time M. de Vaux made his bow and walked away. Then Clotilde turned her head and saw the occupants of the two little chairs in the background, the black and golden heads bent forward

together, one of them, at least, quite carried away from the Château de Champfort. She touched Thérèse, who woke suddenly from her fit of silence, and began to laugh.

"He is a wonderful young man, that cousin René of ours," she said. "So amazingly young and goodnatured. My dear, you have no notion of the stock of romance he has brought from England. He will lose it all here, poor fellow. Somebody will make a marriage for him. I hope it will be one that he likes, or I pity both him and his wife. Heavens, Clotilde, why do you blush so, my dear? Were you thinking of the eloquence of M. de Vaux?"

"I was not blushing," said Clotilde, rather indignantly.

"Ah, pardon!"

People were beginning to go away, or rather to move off into another room, where "goûter" was spread out on the long table—wine, fruit, cakes, and so on. There'se took the Mornay party under her wing, and Adèle had, after all, to give up the end of her story.

"Come, monsieur, you may escort us into the dining-room," said Thérèse to René, whose disconsolateness returned, as he began to feel himself helpless again. "Mamma will not be angry, for I want you to give me a large piece of cake. It is ravenous work

going to church and making one's self agreeable. You find it so, Clotilde, no doubt, and so must that poor M. de Vaux. As for the little one, I suppose fairy tales are enough for her."

Under the cover of Thérèse's chatter, which she now turned on Adèle, two or three words passed between René and Clotilde.

"Thank you, monsieur, for your goodness to my little sister"

"Anything for you, mademoiselle."

With these words there were looks, adoration from René, shy, surprised, incredulous happiness from Clotilde.

The good Mademoiselle Jourdain marched on, and was aware of nothing. But neither words nor looks were lost on Thérèse, as she bent smiling over Adèle, and twisted one of the child's long black curls round her fingers.





CHAPTER VI.

THÉRÈSE.

MADAME DE CHAMPFORT, being an excellent mother, was in the habit of visiting her daughter's room the very last thing at night, to see that all was right and safe, and that the femme-de-chambre had done her duty properly. On the night of the Bishop's reception, she came in as usual, and found Thérèse alone, sitting on the sofa in a pink dressinggown, with a book of devotion in her hand. But she was in high spirits, and quite ready to talk.

"Sit down, mamma, if you are not too sleepy to stay with me a little. You ought to be tired, after entertaining all those people; but you are a wonderful woman; the more you have to do, the better you do it, and the more beautiful you look."

"Thank you, my dear," said Madame de Champfort,

smiling, and seating herself in an arm-chair; "your compliments are worth having, one gets them so seldom."

"Ah! you see I am sincere. I do not find everyone charming, by any means, so I do not tell them so. I have a little favour to ask you, dear mamma."

"What is it?"

"That my cousin René and I may talk English together."

Madame de Champfort lifted her eyebrows with a little air of surprise and doubt.

"And nobody else will understand you! Well, I hardly know. Whose is this fine idea—René's or yours?"

"Oh, mine. He knows nothing about it. But he will certainly be delighted."

"You are a curious creature, my dear Thérèse. You declare that you will never marry, and then you wish to make an intimacy with the first agreeable young man you meet."

"Intimacy, mamma!—talking a few words of English! And what has that to do with marrying? René is a relation; he is nobody."

"Indeed!" said Madame de Champfort. "I must think. You like him so much, then?"

"Yes; I find him very agreeable. He has all sonts of amusing things to tell me about England.

There is one reason for which I should like to be married."

"What may that be?" said Madame de Champfort. She studied Thérèse curiously, thinking that her plan was likely to carry itself out without much further trouble. And yet she was not sure. In other girls, this frank way of speaking would have been a bad sign. But Thérèse was different from girls in general, and certainly was not likely to have her life interfered with by any sentiment.

There'se, whose brains had been busily at work all the evening, was also studying her mother, whom she suspected of having plans concealed from her.

"My reason is," said she, "that I could then make happy marriages for my friends. That is an amusement I should delight in. I should find the handsomest and most agreeable man in France, and marry him to my sweet Clotilde de Mornay."

The amusement was one very delightful to Madame de Champfort herself, who had had as much of it as most people. But she did not set about it in quite such a romantic way.

"You are very benevolent," she said. "And shall I tell you the consequences? Your handsome, agreeable man would no doubt admire Clotilde, but he would be disgusted with the poverty at Mornay, and with the Comte's fancies. He would take

Clotilde to Paris, where she would be miserable very soon—would pine for her sister, for country air, for old Jourdain, for everything she has known in this bornée life of hers. She would become dévote, melancholy—would so fatigue her husband, that at the end of a year or two they would probably separate. There is your happy marriage!" said the Marquise, shrugging her shoulders and throwing up her hands.

- "I do not believe it," said Thérèse.
- "Probably not. But it is true."
- "I should not marry Clotilde to a man like that—a heartless person. I mean him to be good and amiable."
- "Then let me advise you to give up the idea of his being handsome and agreeable."

There'se shook herself impatiently. Then she made a little dash, quite intentionally, in the direction of a discovery.

- "I suppose you would call Clotilde happy if she was to marry anyone like M. de Vaux."
- "You could not make a wiser choice for your friend," said Madame de Champfort, smiling. "You would ensure the happiness of Clotilde's whole family, as well as her own. Your idea is really brilliant."
- "Charming, truly! A man old enough to be her father!"

- "What does that signify?" said Madame de Champfort.
- "Oh, mamma, you are too practical for me. Well, may I talk English with René?"
- "As you please. Only remember that I am giving you great liberty, and that you are bound in honour to use it reasonably."
- "You need not be afraid, mamma. I know the world pretty well for my age."

As Madame de Champfort went into her own room, she sighed, for such remarks as these reminded her of those adventures in Paris from which Thérèse had gained what she called her knowledge of the world. But she never thought that Thérèse could do any mischief, however wise she might pretend to be. To the Marquise a young girl was simply a young girl, and, as such, quite incapable of either divining or hindering the plans of older people—and as to a young girl setting up as a match-maker among her own friends, the idea was too absurd to be entertained for a moment.

René de la Laurière was very willing, at this time, to stay at La Girouette. He was obliging his father, who wished him to overlook some alterations in the house and the grounds about it—and he was also pleasing himself. For he could not be expected to spend the whole of the long days loitering about

among the workmen, and it was natural that he should look for such amusement as his friends could give him. So during the next week or two he was continually turning up, either at Champfort, where he was sure of being welcome, or, as often as he dared, at Mornay. He had a wonderful talent for making his way, which he had inherited from the spirited César Lyon, to whom convent garden walls were no barrier. As long as things went smoothly, and there were no serious difficulties to make him despondent, he had many clever ways of getting onfinding out sympathies with people, making himself useful, or even necessary-all as means to the one end he had at heart. The future was very misty. He did not know whether his father would consent to his proposals being made to Mademoiselle de Mornay -he did not know whether, if they were made, the old Comte would receive them. But though all this was doubtful, it must be happy and pleasant and advantageous for Monsieur René to become a favourite guest at the Château de Mornay: to sit for hours, if it was necessary, with the Comte in his library, deep in the governments of bygone ages; and then to wander out on that charming hill-side, and quite naturally drop in upon Clotilde and Adèle and Mademoiselle Jourdain at their work or their reading: to tell stories, if Adèle would have them; to play with Nico, to make excursions down to the farm-yard if any orders were wanted there, to fish in the brook, or ramble over the heathy hills.

Great confusion arose in Mademoiselle Jourdain's worthy mind, from the constant visits of this young Of course, he was never for a moment alone with Clotilde; in fact, the farm began to suffer from this new anxiety of hers; but in her view he had no business there at all, and she was much tried by Adèle's joyful exclamations, and Clotilde's smile of pleasure, when he could be spied at the foot of the It was true that Clotilde seemed to be growing hill. brighter and happier day by day; there was a new light in her quiet brown eyes, and though her voice and movements were as soft and gentle as ever, she might be heard singing now and then on the terraces by herself, and was more ready than ever to join Adèle in the gay little catches they had learned to sing together. Perhaps this new gaiety was partly owing to her visits to Champfort—of which she made two or three following that Sunday—to the Marquise's kindness, and Thérèse's enlivening friendship.

Though René came to Mornay much more than Mademoiselle Jourdain approved, he spent most of his days at Champfort, where a friendship seemed to have arisen between him and Thérèse, which, in its turn, gave serious trouble to some of the lookers-on.

Their conversations, to be sure, were held in rooms full of people, but they would often sit together a little apart. There'se would make nods to her mother, and say, "Pardon, mamma! René and I are going to talk English." Then she and her companion, both with beaming faces, would begin a talk that seemed so delightful, so engrossing, that often conversation flagged in the room, and all eyes were turned upon these two, chattering away in an unknown tongue.

Madame de Champfort's friends wondered how she could permit it, but she took it with great philosophy. One day she said, "Really, Thérèse, I do not know that I am right in letting you and our good René exchange confidences in this way. Madame de Brimbore thinks it scandalous, I can see. And I must confess I felt curious this evening. What was it that you both found so exciting?"

"Ah! bah! How can I explain to you now, mamma? I have forgotten. Some of René's adventures in England, no doubt."

"You and René seem to be great friends," said Madame de Champfort.

"The best friends in the world, mamma. We might have been brought up in England, we understand each other so well."

"Be a little more quiet in your remarks, or I shall

have to put a stop to the English," said Madame de Champfort.

"That will be a pity, for René has such a good accent, and I am learning it from him," replied Thérèse.

Madame de Champfort knew that there was not much use in lecturing Thérèse. Now, as ever, she was impracticable. Her mother could only look on—remonstrate—trust to her own determination that everything should go well. She was a little uncomfortable, suspecting she did not know what; certainly not that Thérèse was acting the part of her worst enemy.

The fact was that René, anything but a reserved young man, and going always on his English tack, had one day, in a sudden fit of low spirits, confided to Thérèse his half-hopeless admiration for her friend. Thérèse was charmed: she sympathised, she encouraged. Her own ideas on these subjects had become revolutionary since her narrow escape from the arranged marriage with Philippe de Lagny. In various ways she had quite convinced herself that her mother meant Clotilde to marry M. de Vaux, and the notion of saving Clotilde from this sacrifice, of marrying her to a charming young man like René, whose affection she could hardly help returning, and also, one fears, of spoiling Madame de Champfort's carefully laid plan, was very attractive to this wicked

There'se. She gravely told Rene that he had better lose no time, for she had reason to think that Clotilde's friends were making other arrangements for her. However, There'se thought that Clotilde herself was as yet quite ignorant of these; she therefore advised René—who, now that he had confided in her, hung on her words as on those of an oracle—to lose no time in writing to his parents, and in the meanwhile to speak to Clotilde himself in English fashion, and make her promise to listen to nobody else.

All this afforded plenty of material for the English conversations, in which René poured out his plans and Thérèse delivered her advice. The two conspirators were deep enough to avoid names, and to change their interesting subject whenever anyone in the room looked at them too suspiciously.

In the meanwhile, Monsieur de Vaux stayed on at Champfort, and his friend the Marquise drove him one day all round about Mornay, showing him the château and its surroundings from every point of view, without finally committing him by a personal introduction to M. de Mornay. The place did not look like a promising site for the model farm which M. de Vaux had pictured to himself. But he assured the Marquise, that since he had had the happiness of seeing Mademoiselle de Mornay, a much worse situation would have satisfied him.

Under these circumstances, Madame de Champfort thought she might proceed seriously. She therefore wrote a long and flattering account of M. de Vaux to the Comte de Mornay, introducing him as the person she had talked of in her morning visit the other day, and saying that his wish to be connected with M. de Mornay had been very much strengthened by the beauty and charming manners of Mademoiselle Clotilde, on whose perfections Madame de Champfort herself begged most sincerely to congratulate M. de Mornay. She ended by asking when she might have the honour of presenting her friend to the Comte—of course supposing that he was inclined to receive the proposals favourably.

In answer to this, M. de Mornay wrote a most polite letter, begging the Marquise, her husband, her daughter, and Monsieur de Vaux, to do him the honour of dining with him the next day at Mornay-le-Haut.





CHAPTER VII.

MOONLIGHT AT MORNAY.

ADEMOISELLE JOURDAIN and Athanase 1 stood and talked together in the long, bare dining-room at the Château de Mornay. Athanase was gay, smiling, and encouraging. Mademoiselle looked very odd. She had lately come from the library, where M. de Mornay had been telling her of the invitation he had sent for the next day. He had also told her another startling piece of news, which was to be for the present a secret. One or both of these revelations had affected Mademoiselle Jourdain to such a degree that her face was quite discoloured by the violence of her feelings. were red patches on it. It was with almost a groan that she announced the dinner-party to her friend Athanase, and his cheerful reception of the news did not seem to do her much good.

"Figure it to yourself, Athanase," she said. "Four guests—and such guests. Mousieur and Madame de Champfort, Mademoiselle de Champfort, Mousieur de Vaux—bah!" This exclamation was one of such disgust, that mademoiselle felt bound to explain herself. "Do you understand, my good Athanase, do you see? Think of the establishment at Champfort—think of us. What are we poor unfortunates to give these people to eat and drink?—how are we to wait upon them? M. le Comte must have been dreaming when he sent such an invitation."

"Let mademoiselle console herself," said Athanase.
"For my part, I am charmed to see a little of the world—it is like old times. There will be plenty to eat and drink; mademoiselle need not fear; and as to waiting, me voild!" he cried, giving himself a thump on the chest. "Madame la Marquise will bring a man or two, if that is all. There is wine in the cellar, good Spanish wine that no one knows of but myself. M. le Marquis will find it excellent."

"But the idea of inviting people to a house like this!" sighed Mademoiselle Jourdain.

"A thousand pardons, mademoiselle; but M. le Comte knows best. If it pleases him to ask his old friends, he must know that they will come to visit him, not his house. And mademoiselle should remember the advantage to the demoiselles. It has

often grieved me to the heart, to think of their growing up here in the wilderness. Madame la Marquise will perhaps make a marriage for Mademoiselle Clotilde one of these days, as she did for Madame la Comtesse de Belleville."

"Your ideas are original, Athanase," said Mademoiselle Jourdain, sadly. "But the present question is this dinner-party."

"Precisely, mademoiselle. I will immediately go and consult with the cook, and I will bring mademoiselle a sketch of the dinner. Everything will be managed easily. As to the laying of the table, the plate, the glass, the flowers, mademoiselle can leave all that to me. I beg that she will not disarrange herself. She seems fatigued. May I fetch a glass of eau sucrée, or fleur d'orange?"

"I thank you, Athanase, but I am very well, and want nothing," said mademoiselle. "Arrange matters with the cook, and come to me in the garden."

She wandered off upon the terrace, and took a few turns up and down, with an aimlessness that was very strange to her. She had always known that this must come some day—that Clotilde's sweet presence must pass away, and the little circle be broken up. And she never dreamed of questioning the wisdom of Madame de Champfort and Monsieur de Mornay in the choice they had made. But the

good old Jourdain, underneath her stern worship of duty, had a corner of romance in her heart, and the romance was all for Clotilde. The hero was to make his appearance some day—Clotilde's friend would be satisfied with nothing less than a perfect hero—and then a life was to be arranged for her where every perfection harmonised,

"And joy was duty, and love was law."

Not that such a word as "love" could ever pass the lips of Mademoiselle Jourdain; but she believed in the thing secretly, for all that.

And now Clotilde was to be maried to that dry, stupid old Vicomte de Vaux, and her poor governess must keep the secret that gnawed at her heart, and be just the same as usual with her pupils, and arrange with Athanase the dinner that was to be eaten by this detested man.

"I wish it would choke him!" muttered Mademoiselle Jourdain; and then she trembled at her own wickedness. She must have been very far gone, indeed, before the evil spirit could have put such words into her heart—awful words, which after all she did not mean.

She went to her darlings with a humble and softened heart, and sat with them under the cedar-tree, listening to the daily chapter of French history, till Athanase came from the cook.

Athanase and Jeanne, the cook, were equal to their task, and everything was ready, without any fuss or bustle, by the evening of the next day. Mademoiselle Jourdain overlooked Babette, who was growing old for her work, in the dressing of the young ladies. She herself twisted up Clotilde's soft brown locks, and arranged Adèle's curls on her pretty white neck. They were both dressed in white, the child with embroidery and blue ribbons, Clotilde without any colour but a red flower in her hair. Mademoiselle Jourdain then arrayed herself in her best black silk, and went down into the old-fashioned tapestried salon, where Clotilde had set vases with tall lilies in them to stand in the windows. The two sisters were out on the terrace, where the pots of great red geraniums were glowing in the deep intense light of evening. Their grandfather, tearing himself away from his books to look into the much less distinct world of Clotilde's future, came out and joined them. His hair was brushed, and he had a good coat on, for Athanase had found time to look after his master.

The Comte was able to observe his grand-daughters as they came along the terrace, and he confessed to himself that Madame de Champfort and her friends were not so far wrong about Clotilde; there was some beauty in the girl. With an air and a figure like that, she ought certainly to make a good marriage;

but no doubt this De Vaux was all that could be desired.

"You are taking the air, mesdemoiselles," he said, smiling. "Permit me to admire your toilettes; they are elegant. You, at any rate, are not disturbed by these visitors. You will be glad to see them, eh?"

"Charmed, grandpapa!" said Adèle, with a little skip. "I only wish my dear friend Monsieur René was coming too."

"And you, Clotilde?" said the Comte.

"I, grandpapa?" said Clotilde, smiling, and colouring faintly. "I like Madame de Champfort. I shall be very glad to see her, and my friend Thérèse too."

"That is right," said the Comte. "And I must be glad to see the whole party, especially M. de Vaux, as he is a stranger. What is he like, this Monsieur de Vaux?"

"He is very quiet and agreeable," said Clotilde, wondering a little at the question, and at the bright, wakeful manner in which her grandfather was looking at her.

"Ah! do you pretend to admire him?" cried Adèle.
"He is the ugliest little man that ever lived. Clotilde thinks so too, grandpapa."

A rather curious smile passed over M. de Mornay's face.

"One may be ugly," he said, "and yet agreeable."

"He is not so ugly, I assure you," said Clotilde.

"Adèle is a foolish child, and says too much. He talked to me very kindly."

"He is neither so handsome nor so agreeable as Monsieur René," said Adèle, decidedly. "We shall see. Grandpapa will agree with me. He does not like these stupid people, who talk and walk about just like machines. They tire him to death, and me too."

"You are a great critic, mademoiselle," said M. de Mornay.

He looked with an odd, dawning interest from one to the other. Meeting them always at breakfast and dinner, and now and then in the course of the day. he yet seldom had a thought to spare for them; they passed him without making an impression; their voices, laughing or singing in the distance, pleased him, when they did not disturb him; he asked no questions about them of Mademoiselle Jourdain, but was satisfied in believing that she did her duty by them. They were "Henri's children," and had to be brought up and taken care of like other children. Now that time had gone on, and that Clotilde's marriage was talked of, a little curiosity was stirred in their grandfather's heart. But it was only a faint sensation, and was likely to go to sleep again as soon as he was back among his papers and his systems of government. It lasted through that evening, though, and delighted Madame de Champfort, who found that none of her remarks were lost, and that her friend M. de Vaux was received with that charming personal politeness of which no one was a greater master than the old Comte de Mornay.

Perhaps it was a rather trying evening for M. de Vaux, who felt himself under inspection from the moment of arriving on the terrace, and being received there by the family. But he was an unaffected man. and he really admired the old château, its owner, and, at a respectful distance, Mademoiselle Clotilde, so that he made a sufficiently pleasing impression. He was a curious creature for a Frenchman, this Adrien de Vaux. With many people he was silent, not from hauteur, but simply because he had nothing to say to them, and for him the ordinary talk of society did not exist. But those with whom he had any subject in common found him agreeable and intelligent, with a sort of quiet sincerity which attracted some minds. Madame de Champfort was one of his few lady friends; the best part of her nature valued him, and she liked his faith in her good intentions. He and Thérèse, it is pretty plain, detested each other. She laughed at him without mercy, and he had remarked that Mademoiselle Thérèse was "almost a little too clever for a young lady."

Dinner passed off very well. Athanase was everywhere, and Mademoiselle Jourdain's mind was relieved, for Monsieur and Madame de Champfort seemed quite happy and contented. Later in the evening, after some time had been spent in the salon, M. de Mornay took the Marquis and Marquise into the library, under the pretence of showing them his manuscript. M. de Vaux followed them, in obedience to a sign from Madame de Champfort; the library door was shut, and there they all remained.

Mademoiselle Jourdain seized this opportunity to invite Adèle to go to bed. Adèle sighed deeply. She wished Mademoiselle Thérèse good-night, gazing wistfully into her face; perhaps she hoped she would intercede, and help her to another hour of life.

"What makes the child so sad?" said Thérèse, half-laughing. "Ah, little wicked one, I know; I have suspected all the evening. You want that charming René who tells you fairy-tales, is that it? I wondered where all your fine spirits were gone. Well, it was cruel of monsieur your grandpapa to leave that poor creature to eat his dinner all alone at La Girouette. I wonder we do not see him prowling about outside, peeping in at us through the windows. Don't you think, Adèle, he must be somewhere out there in the moonlight?"

- "I should like to go and see," said Adèle, under her breath.
- "I daresay you would," said Thérèse, laughing.
 "Well, ask Mademoiselle Jourdain."
- "Say good-night, my child, and come with me," Mademoiselle Jourdain answered to Adèle's doubtful glance. "Let me assure you, mademoiselle, that M. de la Laurière is here quite enough by daylight. I could do without such visitors myself; they distract the attention from wiser objects."
- "But we are not all so wise as you, dear mademoiselle," answered Thérèse. "Good-night, little one, and pleasant dreams."

She kissed the child's forehead, while Adèle kissed her hand. Then after a much warmer embrace from Clotilde, the little lady danced away upstairs, followed more slowly by her governess.

When the two girls were left alone in the salon, Thérèse seemed restless. She fanned herself violently, and walked up and down. Then she stopped at the open window, and looked out across the country, which lay all in long weird lights and shadows, tinted almost pale gold by the lately risen moon.

"It looks like Adèle's fairy-land," she said. "Come, Clotilde," and she held out her hand.

This girl had the influence of a strong will over people, and could often make her friends do as she chose. And Clotilde was by no means a weak character, but the strangest feeling had come over her that evening, as if she was in the hands of some resistless fate, which was carrying her away. It was a helpless, melancholy feeling, and unreasonable too, for everybody was kind, everybody smiled at her and paid her compliments. Only good Mademoiselle Jourdain's face bore an almost threatening gravity; perhaps it was that which affected the sensitive spirits of this girl whom she loved.

Clotilde was not sure that it was right for Thérèse and herself to go out alone together in the moonlight. But Thérèse was already outside the window, and was looking back for her, her eyes shining, a mysterious smile on her face. Clotilde went; her friend took her arm, and they walked slowly along the upper terrace in the evermore glorious moonlight. It was indeed like another world; the lighted house was silent behind them; there was not a sound from the village in the valley below. Only down there in the low ground the frogs croaked by the water, and now and then an owl hooted mournfully as it flew.

"It is like an enchanted place," said Thérèse, in a whisper. "Let us go down on the grass yonder. How dark the old cedar looks!"

Clotilde pressed her arm. "Did you see something? Did you see a figure standing close to the cedar—

there—just where that shadow falls? I think there is somebody watching us, Thérèse."

."Who could it be, my dear? It is only your fancy. Are you afraid, then, to go down on the lower terrace? No, I saw nothing. There is nothing. But if you are afraid, little one, let us stay here."

"No," said Clotilde, half-ashamed, "I am not afraid." They went down the steps, and walked up and down the lower terrace, screened from the house by the geranium-pots and orange-trees. There seemed to be no one there but themselves.

"I must make the most of you, petite, while I have you," said Thérèse, "for I suppose you will be married soon; and as to myself, I shall never marry."

"Oh no, I shall not be married soon," said Clotilde.

"Not at all, perhaps. It is more likely you will."

"Pardon. I have made my resolution. Listen, and I will tell you why."

Clotilde listened in deep, silent interest as Thérèse told her the history of the Lagny arrangement, and how it had failed.

"That is how we French girls are sacrificed," she said. "Everyone was happy and delighted, my mother and all, because I was going to marry that fool. Merci! I have had enough of such things. My sister, too, poor Léontine, with her rich husband and splendid châteaux! My dear, when I saw her

last, she confided to me that she was miserable. For what do we sell ourselves, we French women? Is it anything worth the exchange? Read English books; they show one what life ought to be. Ah, my little Clotilde, if I could only save you!"

To Clotilde this talk was rather awful; it was such a rebellion against the powers that were. But she was touched by Thérèse's affection, and raised her hand to her lips before she answered her.

"But, dear Thérèse, is it not one's duty to submit? And as to me, I hope they will let me stay with Adèle till she grows up, and then become a *religieuse*."

"They will never let you," said Thérèse, "and besides that, my sweet, you do not wish it really. If you could make an English marriage, that would be the happiest thing for you—somebody who loved you better than himself, and only cared to spend his life in making you happy. There is no reason why M. de Mornay should not consent. He need not be poor—he might even be richer than other people, who knows!"

Certainly There'se would not have dared to talk in this way by daylight; but somehow, under this sweet, dreamy moon it was impossible not to listen—to let her talk on—even to confess to one's self, deep down in one's own heart, that such a life might be, and could be imagined, even to the hero of it. They were standing close to the old cedar, when Clotilde suddenly felt herself tremble and colour scarlet under the words that Thérèse whispered in her ear.

"Ma chérie, forgive me. I have something to tell you. My cousin René adores you—here he is to tell you so for himself."

There'se gently withdrew her hand from Clotilde's arm, and moved a few steps away. René stole out from under the sheltering branches to where Clotilde stood for the moment transfixed, and began to plead his cause himself, eagerly, rapidly, in low, earnest tones.

"Oh, monsieur, this is not right," said Clotilde.

"Not right, dearest mademoiselle! But what was I to do? How was I to speak to you? It is against custom, I know, but cannot you forgive me, if I wished first to know my fate from your sweet, lovely, charming self. If you hate me, why, then, I go away, and do not torment you any more. If you give me any hope, then, angel of my life, I shall have time to think of rules, of etiquette. Tell me, dearest, most angelic, may I offer myself to monsieur your grandfather? Is there anything that stands in the way?"

Clotilde knew in her heart that this was happiness, that life with René would be what Thérèse had just described—ah, that false Thérèse! But still she felt frightened and sad; the presentiment that had weighed upon her all the evening seemed heavier

than ever now, when it ought to have vanished away. She was afraid; she did not know what to say; she wished René had not hidden himself under the tree, and then was angry with herself for being unreasonable. After all, was not this the happiest and best way, strange and uncivilised as it seemed. Was it not far better than these sad marriages she heard of every day—than arrangements such as poor Thérèse had suffered from—than a miserable life like Léontine's, with a husband whom no one could like or respect much?

René went on telling her how he loved her; it was all like a romance, yet it was true. He said that she should live where she pleased, do what she pleased, never be parted from Adèle. "Do not you think you could be happy with me?" he pleaded. "Give me some answer, before I die of impatience."

"If they will all consent-yes," said Clotilde.

"No one could have the heart to ruin our happiness. And oh, my adorable, promise me one thing! If a greater marriage is offered to you—it might be, so easily—think of your poor René, do not forsake him. My name is not equal to yours, I know that too well, and I fear M. de Mornay will say so; but the noblest man in France could not offer you a more faithful heart. Promise that you will not give me up. I shall certainly die if you do."

"I promise," said Clotilde. "I could not forget."

Then came quick steps, and a low voice calling—
"Clotilde, my child!"

René kissed her hand passionately, and withdrew into the darkness of the cedar. She walked along the terrace to meet Thérèse, her eyes shining, her cheeks burning; to this French girl the adventure of that evening was almost as wonderful as if she had found herself suddenly in Paradise, walking with angels under the trees there.

"Are you happy?" whispered Thérèse.

" Oh yes!"

"Ah, I am truly glad to hear it. There is your mademoiselle coming out of the salon to look for us. The others are still holding their family council in the library," said Thérèse. "How obliging of them to be so long!"

There was a tone of mockery in her voice, which even Clotilde could not help noticing.

"A family council!" she said. "What is it about?"

"Who knows! Calm yourself, petite, and do not tremble like a leaf in the wind, or they will all think I have led you into some mischief.—Were you looking for us, mademoiselle? The moonlight on this terrace is so heavenly that we could not resist walking here," said Thérèse, politely, as they mounted the steps, and met Mademoiselle Jourdain at the top.



CHAPTER VIII.

A PROPOSAL.

"I HAVE been dreaming of Monsieur René, and he was telling me a more glorious story than ever," said Adèle, when she opened her eyes and wished her sister good-morning.

Clotilde kissed her with glowing cheeks. She, too, had been dreaming of Monsieur René.

Clotilde was a complete puzzle that morning to Mademoiselle Jourdain. Some change had come over her; she was under some strange excitement. Yet she seemed anything but unhappy; her colour went and came, and smiles broke over her face without apparent reason. Sometimes her governess thought that she must have heard the truth; but then—could it be possible that she would take it in this way?

No revelation of any kind was made till after breakfast, when M. de Mornay called both Clotilde and Mademoiselle Jourdain to speak to him in the library. He told them to sit down, and Clotilde took her place in a ray of sunshine that streamed across the floor. The twilight girl, with bright eyes, bright cheeks, and mouth half-smiling, looked for once like a morning in summer.

M. de Mornay's papers lay scattered about as usual, and his eyes wandered to them longingly, but he perceived that ten minutes must be robbed from France, and given to his grand-daughter. It was as well to waste as little time as possible, however, so he made his announcement at once.

"My little Clotilde, I have received a proposal of marriage for you. It is surprising that you are old enough to be married, but I suppose that is the case, and therefore it only remains to consider the proposal on its merits. They are numerous, and—in fact, I have accepted it."

Clotilde looked at him, and then at Mademoiselle Jourdain, in something between hope and terror. Mademoiselle's face was not encouraging—it was nothing but gloom; but then she did not like René, and had disapproved of his visits, so that if this proposal came from him——But did it? that was the question. The Comte seemed rather bored by these glances, and moved impatiently in his chair.

"You need not look at mademoiselle," he said.

"She knows the whole thing; I told her of it yesterday. Look at me. What is it you want to know?"



"CLOTILDE TOOK HER PLACE IN A RAY OF SUNSHINE."

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"Will you tell me who it is, grandpapa?" said Clotilde, in a low voice.

Yesterday! then it could not be René, and this was despair—unless his father had written without his knowledge.

"Certainly no one has a better right to know," said M. de Mornay. "I am glad you are reasonable. It is the Vicomte de Vaux. You do not dislike him. You told me yourself yesterday that he was agreeable, and not so ugly. I agree with you, mademoiselle, now that I have seen him. He is intelligent, at least; he has an idea of improving property. I shall not find it impossible to live in the same house with him."

"Grandpapa!" exclaimed Clotilde. She rose from her chair and stood before him. All her colour and life had fled, as if they had never been. "You have not accepted M. de Vaux for me?" she murmured, hardly above her breath.

"What is the child talking about?" said M. de Mornay. "There is no occasion for that face of horror. You will not be separated from your sister. You will probably spend the rest of your life at this old Mornay that you love so much. De Vaux has no château of his own. He is going to live here, and turn the place into a model farm. I have a horrid fear of the noise of machinery, but he assures me that all that will go on in the valley, where the buildings

are now. So we must content ourselves. He has a great admiration for you, but he will tell you that himself. There is nothing more to be said at present, I think."

The Comte made his visitors a slight bow, and was turning to his table with an air of relief, when Clotilde walked up and stood close to him.

- "I am sorry to displease you, grandpapa," she said, but I cannot marry M. de Vaux."
 - "And why not, pray?"
 - "Because—it is impossible."
 - "A better reason, if you please."

Clotilde was silent. Her cheeks were burning again with shame and misery. Brought up as she had been, the thought of uttering René's name, of confessing that talk last night under the cedar, was too terrible. She stood there trembling, her eyes full of tears.

"Your life, mademoiselle," said the Comte, "is spent in sentimental meditation, mine in action. I am truly sorry that I have no more time to offer you at present. I must request you to retire with mademoiselle, who will kindly let me know when you have regained your reason."

Clotilde drew herself up proudly, then turned and walked out of the room, followed by her governess.

M. de Mornay made sundry furious exclamations, gnashed his teeth stamped his foot, marched two or three times up and down the room, and finally seized his pen and wrote to Madame de Champfort, begging her to take the trouble of reasoning Clotilde out of her childish obstinacy. Her success in managing her own charming daughters, he said, made him feel sure that no young girl, even were she as stupid and ill-tempered as his unhappy grand-daughter, could resist her kind influence. After despatching this, M. de Mornay sat down to his daily work with an easier mind, and soon forgot family troubles in the early constitutional history of England.

In the meanwhile, Madame de Champfort, well satisfied that she had done her best for M. de Vaux and Mademoiselle de Mornay, had turned her thoughts to her own plans. Having said good-bye to the Vicomte, who was going to Paris on business which must tear him away for a few days from his intended bride, she sat down and wrote one of her longest and most agreeable letters to her "bien chère Marie." that is, to Madame de la Laurière, in which she threw out broad hints of René's attachment to Thérèse. From this, she said, and from her personal liking for René, she had been allowing herself to dream charming dreams of the future. It was a little idyl, she said, a romance, quite strange in these matter-of-fact days, but then René and Thérèse were both of them young people of uncommon minds. She

wondered whether any idea of the same kind would occur to her dear Marie.

The morning after this letter was written and posted came M. de Mornay's disturbing news about Clotilde. Madame de Champfort said nothing to any of her family, but ordered her horse a little earlier than usual, and rode off with Félicien to Mornay-le-Haut.

She asked for Mademoiselle de Mornay, and Athanase showed her into the salon, which was all in shadow, with sun-blinds down, except where a sunbeam found its way in at a corner, and fell in a long bright line across the floor. The first person who appeared was Adèle, a wild little figure peeping in at the door,

"Where is your sister, little one?" asked Madame de Champfort.

"She is coming," said Adèle. "Oh, madame, can you tell me what is going to happen? Clotilde was terrible yesterday, and so was mademoiselle. And Monsieur René has not been here for an age, for three or four whole days. We are all as sad as if we were going to die."

"Poor little thing!" said Madame de Champfort.
"You will be happy again one of these days. Has
René been here often, then?"

She looked grave as she asked this question, but Adèle had not time to answer it, for Clotilde came in, and gave her a sign to run away. Clotilde stood before the Marquise like a culprit, with eyes cast down; she knew very well what was coming, and perhaps expected some repetition of her grandfather's angry sarcasm. But Madame de Champfort knew that that was not the way to manage a sensitive girl, and the new idea which had almost dawned on her from Adèle's words only gave her manner additional kindness and gentleness as she said, "Come here and sit by me, my dear child."

Clotilde came. The Marquise held her hand, and looked at her keenly, seeing only too well, by the changing colour and the eyes that would not meet hers, that there was something more here than simple dislike of the marriage with Adrien de Vaux.

"I wonder what your thoughts are, Clotilde," she said, after a moment of silence. "Do you think that your grandfather and I are cruel tyrants, who have arranged this marriage for you without any idea of making you happy? My child, you deceive yourself very much. I have known M. de Vaux for years; a better and more noble-minded man does not exist. I should think myself happy if a daughter of mine could be so truly fortunate in her husband. What reason can you have against him, my dear?"

Clotilde shook her head slightly, but made no answer, sitting with her eyes bent on the floor.

"I have always heard," Madame de Champfort went on, "how gentle and good you are—how your relations love you, and you love them. Now think a little of your grandfather—of the happiness to his old age in a relation like M. de Vaux living with him, devoting himself to the family and the estate. Your good Mademoiselle Jourdain cannot always do everything. Think of your little sister, too—of the happy arrangement for her. Be reasonable, dear child, and not fanciful. Is it that you think M. de Vaux too old? Let me assure you he looks older than he is."

Madame de Champfort went on with these reasonings, and others like them, for some minutes, without getting much answer from Clotilde. The girl did not express any violent personal dislike to M. de Vaux. She only shook her head, and said it was impossible.

Madame de Champfort felt very impatient and anxious, but her manner remained the same, quiet and kind. At last she said, "My dear Clotilde, I feel that you are very much alone. You have lost your mother, and no one can quite take her place. Still I ask you to confide in me. Is it possible, my child, that in your youth and ignorance you have allowed yourself to think of some one else—some one that you prefer to M. de Vaux?"

Thus driven into a corner, Clotilde could only answer the truth. It was terrible, but yet it seemed

best to do as Madame de Champfort said—to confide in her.

"Yes, madame. And I have promised—so you see it is impossible."

"My poor child, what right had you, at your age, to promise anything?" said Madame de Champfort, pityingly. "Now you must tell me all. Who is it? When did you meet with him?"

"It was M. de la Laurière," said Clotilde. "On the terrace, madame. The evening that you were here."

"But Thérèse was with you!" said Madame de Champfort, her voice hardening in spite of herself.

"Yes. We went out in the moonlight. He was walking about there, and we talked in the shadow of the cedar. He is going to ask grandpapa, but he wanted to know first if I——"

"Ah! And what did Thérèse do?"

"She walked by herself on the terrace."

"It is the most extraordinary history I ever heard," said Madame de Champfort. "Where was Mademoiselle Jourdain?"

"She was upstairs with Adèle."

The Marquise leaned back in her chair, and contemplated Clotilde with an air of sorrowful astonishment.

"René de la Laurière has not behaved very honourably, my dear," she said. "In the first place, it is always wrong to ignore established customs. And then his marriage with my daughter Thérèse is already half-arranged."

Clotilde started violently. "Oh no, madame!" she exclaimed. "Thérèse told me she would never marry."

"She is mistaken," said Madame de Champfort. "Things are coming to a pretty pass, it seems to me. This young man with his English ideas comes back and makes a revolution. Young ladies disobey their relations, and arrange marriages for themselves without regard to anything but their own fancy. It is absurd, it is disgraceful. You have indeed given me a shock, Clotilde. That a young person of your family, brought up as you have been, should behave with the foolishness and indecorum of an English miss, is almost beyond belief. A girl of proper dignity would rather have died than have joined in such conversation with a young man, at such an hour, in such a place. What do you expect to happen next? Are all other arrangements to be destroyed, that this absurd idea may be carried out, against everybody's interest, to please you?"

"Madame," said Clotilde, earnestly, and with some dignity, "I have made my promise, and for my part I shall keep it—therefore I beg you to express my regret to M. de Vaux. But I also implore you to believe that on that evening I knew nothing of his

proposal, or of—any other arrangement that you mention. M. René told me that monsieur his father would write to my grandpapa—he only asked me first to be sure of my consent. He did not know that anyone meant him to marry Thérèse."

"Mon Dieu! and suppose he did not!" sighed Madame de Champfort. "Is it the custom in France to consult young people first, before one makes the arrangements that are best for them? However, I can only give you my advice in this unfortunate business. Your promise is nothing, for it was a wrong promise. Obedience comes first. Be obedient and reasonable. Now have the goodness to call Mademoiselle Jourdain, and allow me to have a little conversation with her."

Mademoiselle Jourdain was obliged to receive the Marquise's communications with civility and submission. Madame de Champfort spoke with severe astonishment of Clotilde's misbehaviour, and horrified mademoiselle with the news that this unfortunate girl fancied herself in love with René de la Laurière.

"When I tell you, mademoiselle, in confidence, that his marriage with my daughter is partly arranged, you will see what a terrible misfortune this is. She must be persuaded to accept M. de Vaux; it is a perfect match in every way, and M. de Mornay has set his heart upon it. In the meanwhile, let me beg

of you to keep a ceaseless watch upon her, to prevent any chance of her meeting with M. de la Laurière this madness must be cured by stern means, if necessary. You have a great deal in your hands, mademoiselle."

"Yes, madame."

Mademoiselle Jourdain could be very silent at times. On this occasion Madame de Champfort failed in extracting more than two or three words of assent to her remarks. She paid a few minutes' visit to the Comte, to tell him that his grand-daughter would soon understand her duty, and had better not be reasoned with too much. Then she mounted her horse and rode back to Champfort.

Mademoiselle Jourdain went upstairs to look for Clotilde, and found her crying as if her heart would break. For a long time there was no comforting her. At last, with her head on the good old Jourdain's shoulder, she sobbed out piteously—"What did he mean? What does she mean? Oh, dear mademoiselle, what ought I to do?"

"As to your duty, my dearest," answered the stern voice, with a quiver in it, "it is evidently to obey monsieur your grandfather. You do not see it now, but you will presently, I think."

But this counsel only brought another flood of bitter tears.



CHAPTER IX.

OBSTACLES.

THUS Madame de Champfort found her plans overtaken by the very danger she had feared and tried to guard against. They seemed likely to be ruined entirely by René's admiration for Clotilde de Mornay, by his unheard-of misbehaviour in speaking to the girl, and her foolishness in listening to him. part in the affair was also tolerably plain to the Marquise, who felt even more angry with her than with the others. But, justly provoked as she was, she did not dream of giving way to these obstacles, of renouncing her well-made plans, because a set of foolish children chose to think they could make arrangements of their own. Her first step was to get Therese out of the way for the present, by sending her to an old relation who lived in a town fifty miles off, and whose ideas as to discipline were of the strictest. Then she waited a day or two, hoping to receive an answer from Madame de la Laurière.

The excellent La Laurières, meanwhile, found themselves in a dilemma. Madame de Champfort's letter, with its broad hints, had been quickly followed by one from René, begging his parents to ask at once for the only object of his life, the hand of Mademoiselle de Mornay. It was true that the chief idea of René's parents had been to indulge their boy and carry out all his wishes, and M. de la Laurière, especially, had an idea that René should please himself in his marriage, but even he saw many objections to this proposal. M. de Mornay's poverty was well-known. and his grand-daughter's "dot" could be nothing to speak of-perhaps no more than her share of the property at his death. Then the Comte was very proud, and César Lyon de la Laurière was proud too in his way; he expected a refusal, and did not choose to be refused. And the Champfort marriage meant being accepted by all the Champforts as their equal, which was a triumph in itself. Mademoiselle de Champfort would certainly have a dowry equal to her birth, if not to what his only son could offer her.

To Madame de la Laurière, René's marriage with his cousin was the realisation of dreams, a bright dénouement which made up for all the sufferings and struggles of her life. And yet both these parents hated the idea of opposing René, so that they found themselves dragged in opposite directions. much talk with her husband, in which they agreed that René must somehow be brought to reason, Madame de la Laurière made the short railway journey from her home to the station at Champfort, and, to René's great surprise, arrived at La Girouette. There she sat in the little pink chintz salon, and fanned herself, and poured out all she had to say. Marie de la Laurière was usually a quiet, gentle woman, but she became quite excited as she reasoned with her demonstrative René, who marched up and down, vowing that he adored Clotilde de Mornaythat he had told her so-that he would never marry any other woman, certainly not Thérèse, who was not even pretty, and, besides that, would not have him if he asked her.

"Ah! but you deceive yourself, my poor little René!" cried his mother. "Thérèse would not refuse you—she could not; and you yourself confess that you do not dislike her. My son, if you love your mother, be reasonable. Think how happy I shall be to see you received into my family. Nothing could please me better. Come, my child, say that I may make your proposals to Madame de Champfort."

"You forget, my mother," said René. "I tell you I have spoken to Clotilde de Mornay. I am bound

to her. If the proposals are made to anyone, they must be made to M. de Mornay."

"Heavens! but it is impossible. You have been much too rash. It is your own fault—and, my dear son, it is unheard-of in France. I will write to Mademoiselle de Mornay, if you wish. I will tell her that your parents have made other arrangements for you. Yes; that will be easily done."

"No," said René. "My father was not so easily driven back from you, and as he gained his end at last, I shall gain mine. Some day I shall marry Mademoiselle de Mornay."

Madame de la Laurière sighed in despair over her son's obstinacy. If he had only had his parents to manage, René might possibly have gained his end.

The next day Madame de la Laurière paid a long visit to her cousin the Marquise, and with expressions of the deepest gratitude bewailed this absurd fancy of her son's. To her, she said, it would be true happiness to see him married to that charming Thérèse. But she was evidently hopeless, and in low spirits. Madame de Champfort smiled reassuringly.

"The young people have certainly made a mess of it," she said, "but I do not think the disease is past remedy. For one thing, my dear Marie, M. de Mornay would never listen to your son's proposal.

He is going to marry Clotilde to the Vicomte de Vaux. She is a little obstinate, like our dear René, but she will have to give way, and then we shall all come to our senses. We must wait a little; that is all. I have sent Thérèse to my old aunt at Angers for a month or two. Time will do wonders, as usual. The one thing to be regretted is your having sent René to England, where he learned these distracted ideas."

Madame de la Laurière did her best to persuade René to go home with her, but on that point he was quite obstinate; he could not, in any case, leave La Girouette till the alterations were finished. was an excuse, as his mother knew very well, and yet she hardly understood why he should care to stay. For he seemed to have suddenly lost his taste for society; he did not care to go to Champfort, though there were plenty of pleasant people to be met there; and he did not dare to go to Mornay now -at least in open daylight. What were his designs and hopes for the future one can hardly tell; for in France neither man nor woman can marry without the consent of their parents or nearest relations, and it seemed as if neither he nor Clotilde would be able to gain that. He could not go openly to M. de Mornay and ask him for his grand-daughter; all he could do was to refuse firmly to entangle himself anywhere else—to pine, and fret, and torment his mother, and wait impatiently for better days.

In those glorious nights of moonlight and starry darkness, this romantic young man would wander on the heathy hills round Mornay-le-Haut-would lie hidden near the great white château walls in the deepest shadow he could find, or range still closer, like a wild wolf in winter, for the chance of seeing Clotilde's shadow on a lighted window, or perhaps of hearing her voice talking to Adèle, as she used to do in the days when she was happy. But he never saw or heard the lady of his dreams. Clotilde was silent now; she sat in corners, with her head bent over needlework: she was in disgrace. It was true that no one had told M. de Mornay anything about René; but her refusal of M. de Vaux was quite crime enough in his eyes. Till she became reasonable, she must be very plainly shown the odiousness of such conduct; and M. de Mornay, sitting all day in the library, could very easily make his will felt through the house. A shadow had come over the home life there. Mademoiselle Jourdain was stern and sorrowful: Adèle was plaintive and dismal. Clotilde knew that her wickedness was the cause of it all. But she was not, for that, any more inclined to break her promise to René de la Laurière, though she wondered sadly what had become of him-whether he had

submitted, and allowed himself to be betrothed to Thérèse, who had also so unaccountably disappeared from her friend's horizon. Nobody came, and the long summer days went on; the fruit ripened and the flowers faded; the hills and the terrace grew browner, scorched up by the sun.

Early one beautiful morning, Mademoiselle Jourdain had walked down to the farm-yard with Adèle, leaving Clotilde to the melancholy task of her music. Down here, mademoiselle was in her element. She flourished her stick, scolded furiously, argued with the farm men and women who crowded round her, and ended by paying them the most friendly compliments.

She stood in the deep shadow of an archway, for already the sun was blazing down on the picturesque old yards. It was not nine o'clock, but the shepherdess was bringing in her flock; they were hurrying up the slope to their house, while she, a small, sharpfaced, sunburnt old woman, trudged after them in her sabots, and her rough, fierce dog ran impatiently beside her. When the sheep were shut in, and the dog had gone into his little wooden house, and laid himself down in the shade, the shepherdess came down to add her voice to the clamour that surrounded mademoiselle.

Meanwhile, Adèle went about, with her little brown hands clasped behind her print frock, with a dancing step, that kept her curls in a continual ripple. There was so much to interest her in those wild yards, with their old white walls; the dark interiors of those buildings held so many wonderful things. There were the working oxen, standing patiently in the stable; and there, in the corner, was the little green bed of the boy who took care of them. The head woman of the farm, who lived in these old buildings, and cooked for people and animals, had a fancy for flowers; her windows were full of pink geraniums, and a great crimson cactus climbing up a frame.

As Adèle came springing over the broad stone threshold of the farm kitchen, worn by so many tired feet, this woman's little girl, in a close white cap and a very long frock, was standing gravely there in the sunshine. She held out a geranium-blossom to the little lady, who took it with smiles and thanks, and then darted away, with black hair flying, to join Mademoiselle Jourdain.

They were going up the road to visit a wheat-field that was nearly ripe: the early harvest was causing great excitement among all the people of the farm. They went along hand-in-hand, walking quickly, but had not reached the field, when they suddenly met René de la Laurière, all dressed in white linen, with a wild, pale face, tearing along at an Englishman's pace in the hot, bright morning.

He stopped, taking off his hat, and fixing eager eyes upon them.

"Mademoiselle your sister—is she away? is she ill?" he asked Adèle, who sprang joyfully to meet him.

"She is well, monsieur, but very cross. And you?" said Adèle, her dark eyes smiling, and her head a little on one side.

"Ah!" exclaimed René. "Why cannot one be ill—die, when one is miserable? I speak of myself. Tell her that you met me, dear child, and that life is to me nothing but a desert."

"Then you are cross too!" exclaimed Adèle, sorrowfully.

"Might one ask, monsieur," said Mademoiselle Jourdain with indignation, "that you would not speak to a child in this way? How can she understand your unsuitable metaphors? And have you not done mischief enough, that you must try to do more?"

René sighed deeply.

"You know all, mademoiselle?" he said.

"Yes, and perhaps more than you. I know this, for instance," said Mademoiselle Jourdain, in her deep voice, tapping the ground with her stick—"that no happiness was ever found in resistance to duty. You have your duty, monsieur. She has hers. I

trust she will soon set you an example which you will copy."

- "She will forget me?" said René, in a low voice.
- "She will obey her grandfather, I hope and believe."
- "No, it is impossible. Mademoiselle, if you love her, you cannot wish it. My child," said René, in an excited manner, turning suddenly to Adèle, who was gazing at him with wide, solemn eyes, "which do you like best—me, or M. de Vaux?"
- "But, dear monsieur, I adore you," said Adèle, holding out her arms to him. "M. de Vaux is old and stupid. I do not want ever to see him again."
 - "Ah, what an angelic child!" cried René.

He caught Adèle suddenly and kissed her, to the horror of Mademoiselle Jourdain, who at once gave up her wheat-field, seized Adèle by the hand, and marched her back to the farm-yard, while René dashed off down the road.

Long afterwards, Adèle remembered that wild moment—the sudden eager embrace which frightened her, the despair in René's eyes, the shock and terror of it all, and her own guilty and ashamed feeling as her governess led her sternly away.

The next day, Madame de la Laurière, unable to rest in her anxiety, came to La Girouette, found René in a state of hopeless despair, and, exerting all her authority and influence, carried him off home in triumph. So now at last he was gone, Thérèse was gone, and Madame de Champfort thought Clotilde must soon be tired of being on bad terms with everybody. Then, when she saw there was nothing else for it, would come the hour of success for M. de Vaux. In the meantime, as her obstinacy seemed to continue, the Marquise wrote to another person, laying the whole case before her, and showing that it was her duty to do what she could towards a satisfactory arrangement of these family affairs.





CHAPTER X.

AUNT VICTORINE.

THE Comtesse de Belleville, M. de Mornay's only daughter, was certainly a person to whom Madame de Champfort could point with triumph as an example of her success in match-making. She and her husband agreed perfectly well. They were both lazy, self-indulgent, and good-natured. He was rich, had a charming temper, and knew more about cookery than almost any man in France. She was lively, sociable, fond of dress and gaiety, with a talent for making life pleasant to herself and everyone about her. This happy pair never interfered with each other. They spent a good deal of the year apart, but liked each other all the better when they were together. A storm in the Belleville household was a thing unknown.

Madame de Champfort had always kept up her

she was a very different woman, making no pretension to be dévote or high-principled. When they met in Paris, the elder woman sometimes went so far as to remark on her friend's neglect of her old father and her nieces. On which Madame de Belleville would shrug her shoulders, and throw up her hands with a little despairing scream. Could anyone expect her to go to that terrible old place, to eat sour country bread, to sit in dark rooms with two stupid children, to waste her society on her father, who after his first greeting would forget that she was in the house, and bury himself in his manuscripts as usual? Heavens, no! The dear Marquise must herself see the impossibility of the thing.

But, at the same time, Madame de Belleville's respect for the Marquise, and the value she set upon her friendship, were so real, that Madame de Champfort had only to be really in earnest to be obeyed as far as possible. So when, in that late summer, her letter reached Biarritz, where Madame de Belleville was amusing herself, Clotilde's aunt submitted to what seemed unavoidable, and determined that she would go back to Paris by way of Mornay, stay there till its sadness was quite unbearable, and do her part towards bringing the troublesome girl to her senses.

"A girl!—what am I to do with a girl, and one who refuses to let herself be married?" sighed the poor Comtesse. "An ignorant little provincial, with stiff manners, and the accent of Mademoiselle Jourdain! How can it matter what becomes of such an absurdity, whether she marries this Vicomte de Vaux, or the other young man, or goes into a convent, or—But as dear Madame de Champfort chooses to be interested, I must be interested too. My niece! What an idea, to have a niece old enough to be married! Thank heaven, however, it is not so bad as if she was my daughter. We must go, in any case. It is to be hoped that Hippolyte and Clémentine will not die of it, as well as myself."

Madame de Belleville's husband was gone to some baths in Switzerland, his appetite having failed lately in an alarming way; so that there was no need to consider him. And her servants were not long a subject of anxiety. They were charmingly good-humoured, and found some pleasure in dazzling a new sphere. The simple old kitchen of the château, with its stone floor and rows of copper pans; Jeanne, the cook, with her grave face and white cap with long strings; Athanase's untidy cupboards, his old coats, his many occupations, were all looked on with favour by the brilliant Hippolyte, who helped in cooking, plate-cleaning, waiting, and was even ready

to frotter the floors for his good old friend Athanase. Clémentine, though her first evening was sad, owing to the desolate and dusty corridors, and the impression made upon her by the tapestried walls and long, sweeping green curtains of her mistress's room, soon recovered herself, and went out to astonish the peasants in her newest bonnet.

Madame de Belleville herself made the best of it. Even Mademoiselle Jourdain could not manage to be miserable in the face of her pretty obliging ways, though hours and arrangements had to be altered in every direction to please her. The whole household waited upon her day and night. Nico lay at her feet and licked her hand. M. de Mornay was polite and affectionate, and even sat in the salon after dinner to listen to her singing. Adèle watched her Parisian aunt with the deepest interest, as she lay back in the easiest arm-chair and fanned herself, exquisitely dressed, and filling the air with a faint sweet scent that followed her everywhere. She was very kind to the child, who by the second evening was devoted to her: Only Clotilde was shy and silent, full of attention to her aunt, but not ready to join smilingly in her talk, and half unwilling to go with her to Champfort, where of course Madame de Belleville paid frequent visits. Thérèse was not yet come back, and Clotilde had the painful feeling of being

in disgrace. She was sometimes left alone in the great salon with strangers, while her aunt and Madame de Champfort had private conferences—about her, as she knew very well.

Madame de Belleville admired her niece, and soon began to be interested in her, though she thought her silent ways ill-mannered and provoking to a degree. But her heart was touched a little by the girl's sad looks, and one afternoon, when they had been calling at Champfort, where M. de Vaux had appeared again, she called Clotilde to walk with her on the terrace when they got home. Adèle was at her lessons, and the place was all very still; the only creature to be seen was Nico, who came and walked after them. Clotilde laid her hand on his curly head, and looked almost beseechingly into his dear brown eyes; surely behind them there was an understanding, sympathising soul. She had been expecting this serious talk with her aunt; in restless nights it had mixed itself with those happy dreams that were always repeating themselves, and never came true.

"Ma petite," said Madame de Belleville, in her softest tones, "I love you tenderly. You are a charming child, and much prettier than I ever was myself."

"Ah, my aunt, that is quite impossible," said Clotilde.

"I tell you the truth. But you are a riddle to

me. So pretty and so amiable, and yet as obstinate as a log of wood or an Englishwoman. So that was Monsieur de Vaux! Well, I have been curious to see him, and, do you know, I think him very tolerable indeed. That sort of solid goodness wears so well, do you see? Tell me now, dear angel, frankly and truly, why do you object to him?"

"Have not other people told you, Aunt Victorine?" said Clotilde.

"Well, they tell me such very odd things. They tell me that a young man talked nonsense to you without anybody's leave, and that you thought he was so much in earnest, that you were bound to marry no one else. Now I do not pretend to be so strict as that dear Madame de Champfort, and I shall very easily forgive you for listening to him, and all that; but, my dear child, your madness in even supposing that he meant you to remain unmarried for his sake is most astonishing. Besides—I could say more—but am I right so far, Clotilde? Tell me your own version of the story."

There was something very sweet in Madame de Belleville's manner; she spoke without a trace of sternness, smiled, and looked interested and affectionate. The affair seemed to strike her as rather touching and amusing, certainly nothing worse. Clotilde, with much hesitation, told her the sad little history—what René had said, and all that had happened since. Madame de Belleville was tender and sympathetic.

"And you have been expecting to hear of him or see him again?" she said. "No wonder, my poor innocent. What a monster! Now tell me—Adèle was chattering to me the other day about this René, whom she also appears to find charming. You do not talk of such things to a child, I suppose?"

"No, indeed," said Clotilde, sighing, and most earnestly.

It was impossible to doubt that she was speaking with perfect truthfulness. Indeed it had been a trial, which a conscientiousness less than hers would not well have borne, not to breathe a word to her darling little sister of the pain that was wearing her out. Adèle had called her sad and cross, but the real deep reasons of Clotilde's unhappiness were never even hinted to the child, whose childish talk often gave wounds that her loving heart never dreamed of.

"I know the sort of young man very well," said Madame de Belleville. "There are many of them; they take up what they call English ideas, which with them mean simple selfishness. They take a fancy to a girl's face, have the insolence to tell her so, and if they succeed in marrying this object of admiration, so much the worse for her, poor thing.

In a month they wonder what it was that attracted them—and if I know you, my poor Clotilde, you are not a woman who would be happy separated from her husband."

"Oh, my aunt!" exclaimed Clotilde, with a slight shudder. "But I do assure you he is not like that."

"How do you know that?" said Madame de Belleville. "I quite believe he is. I detest these little romances before one is married—they only lead to discontent. A sensitive little saint like you ought to marry a reasonable man who knows how to take care of her. That is the best thing, believe me, little one. If you want amusement, it will come by-and-by."

Clotilde shook her head. "I have said it is impossible; I have promised," was all her answer; and Madame de Belleville suddenly found that it was time to dress for dinner.

So she ceased her arguments for that day.

One morning, Madame de Belleville's room was full of new dresses that had arrived from Paris. Clotilde was called in to admire them, and though she had a strange indifference to dress, she was ready to do her best with remarks and rather weary smiles. She lingered on, when Clémentine had carried them away, in the high south window of her aunt's room, looking out over the great sunny view below. The tall young figure, standing there with an idle, unconscious grace,

was quite in harmony with the old room, where Parisian fineries looked out of place. Madame de Belleville watched her for a minute, but with more anxiety than admiration. Clotilde's type was not then a fashionable one, any more than the severe old-world beauty of the room in which she stood.

Madame de Belleville spoke after a moment, more gravely than was usual with her.

"Still at your dreams, Clotilde? You must wake, my child. The real world is harder than a sentimental fancy, but it is better to live in. We all find that out, sooner or later. I have something to tell you—it will give you pain—but I must. You will bear it well; you will be strong. We shall not be troubled about you any more."

Clotilde looked, but said nothing.

"How it happened, I need not explain," said Madame de Belleville. "But yesterday, at Champfort, I heard something of a letter from M. René de la Laurière. He has come to his senses, that young man. It is only what I expected—felt sure of always. Shall I tell you more?"

"Yes," said Clotilde.

Madame de Belleville bent over the table to avoid the poor girl's eyes.

"Well, Clotilde, do not look so wild. It is as I said. You have been mistaken. This René is not

what you thought him. It is most likely that he will marry Thérèse de Champfort. His father and mother have set their hearts on it."

- "What does he say?" asked Clotilde, in a low voice.
- "Oh, he says—let me see, my memory is so bad—he says that no doubt he admired a certain young lady, but could never have aspired to marrying her. He knew that was impossible. He thought she could hardly have misunderstood him so far—something of that sort. His letter is weak, like himself."
 - "But he did not mean---'
- "Ah yes, my child, certainly. I am sorry, for your sake."
 - "The letter—who did it belong to?"
- "It was written to his mother. She sent it to Madame de Champfort, I suppose."

Madame de Belleville now raised her eyes and was silent, seeing that she had said enough.

Clotilde's eyelids drooped slowly, the wild and eager questioning died away out of her face. Slowly a dark flush rose in her pale cheeks, and faded to paleness again.

- "Mon Dieu! it was a little tragedy," said Madame de Belleville afterwards, describing the scene.
- "Have I told you enough, Clotilde?" she said, when she could be silent no longer.
 - " Merci, ma tante. It is enough, indeed."

She did not look at her aunt, but pressed her hands together, walked with a quick, steady step across the polished boards, and left the room.

No one but Madame de Belleville understood the change in Clotilde which followed this conversation. Her quiet melancholy was suddenly changed into high and most variable spirits, which puzzled Adèle, and made Mademoiselle Jourdain pray for her more earnestly than ever. She went about the house laughing and singing, began to take an interest in her aunt's talk of dress and the world; and though she came down every morning with tired, hollow eyes, and there was something strangely painful in this new gaiety, Madame de Belleville felt satisfied with her work. She had evidently roused the girl's pride—made her angry with herself, contemptuous of René. Things were going very well so far.

One morning Madame de Belleville was resting after her first breakfast among the large pillows of her tall dark bed. Her white fingers, with the long, delicate nails, that looked so helpless, were turning over letters from Paris; she was all surrounded with pale pink wrappings, which suited her complexion. Clotilde came softly in to kiss her aunt and say good-morning.

"Well, my pretty one, how are you?" said Madame de Belleville, absently.

"Dear aunt, is it true—Clémentine says you are going away soon?"

"Next week. I have surely been here long enough," said her aunt, smiling. "I can't live out of Paris, you know. You had better come with me."

"Oh. if I could!"

Madame de Belleville laid down her letters and stared. She had not in the least thought of what she was saying. Now Clotilde's eyes were bright with excitement—there was a colour in her cheeks—her sweet, still face was alight with pleasure.

"You really wish it?" said Madame de Belleville.

'My child, you are charming—I adore you. We will never be separated again. Kiss me; that is arranged. Your good people here shall give you up to me."

Clotilde received her aunt's embrace rather passively.

"I do not know—is it wicked? I am not happy here," she said, low and quickly.

"You shall be happy with me in Paris, my angel," said her aunt. "Leave it all to me. Your uncle will be charmed. Voyons! run away now, and send Clémentine. I must dress as quickly as possible, that I may arrange it with your grandpapa."

It was easily arranged. Madame de Belleville promised her father that Clotilde should come to her senses about M. de Vaux, or, if that was hopeless, that she should marry some one else equally suitable. Mademoiselle Jourdain was grave and uneasy; Adèle was broken-hearted; but what could they do? Clotilde was evidently charmed to go.

So one October morning she left the first part of her young life behind, and went away with her aunt from the lonely château among the hills. Madame de Belleville was happy in the possession of an excellent conscience, and a grateful, approving letter from Madame de Champfort. It was settled that Clotilde was to stay in Paris for the winter; at the end of that time she might reasonably be expected to see her duty and do it.

She was gone from Mornay, where every one, except her grandfather, mourned and missed her. The shepherdess and her mates found their lives a burden to them, Mademoiselle Jourdain's views of their work and her own becoming every day more severe. And Adèle would wake up in the long winter nights and cry for her sister, from whom she had never been parted before. Oh, how could Clotilde go away, pleased and smiling, and leave her little darling behind! Was it not too sad, this dark, dreary winter, with no one but Nico for a play-fellow!



CHAPTER XI.

PARIS.

ONE beautiful afternoon in spring, an open carriage, with two ladies in it, drove up the Avenue des Champs Elysées, and under the Arc, into the Bois de Boulogne. Paris was in all the beauty of its first freshness—early flowers coming out, trees bursting into leaf, the warm sun and south wind banishing furs earlier than usual, and making everywhere a sudden overflow of spring.

Madame de Belleville, who hated cold weather, fat and happy and cheerful, sat smiling under her parasol. To her young companion, with soft, listless brown eyes watching the passers-by, spring did not seem to bring so much pleasure; perhaps she was thinking of the wild flowers about Mornay. But in spite of a certain tired indifference, which had become habitual with Clotilde de Mornay, she did her aunt credit. Madame de Belleville had done what she pleased with the girl, who made no resistance to any of her doings. The consequence was that her complexion and hair were lovely, that the drooping grace of her figure was set off by an artistic style of dress, that all her natural advantages were cleverly made the most of, without any slavish following of fashion. That was all very well, Madame de Belleville thought, for ordinary-looking people; but Clotilde was an idea, a romance, an inspiration for anyone who had the happy task of dressing her, and Madame de Belleville was fortunate enough to find an imaginative modiste who threw her soul into this business. was something of a trial, certainly, to spend one's skill on a young lady who hardly cared to look into the glass, but other people's admiration was almost reward enough. Among her aunt's set that winter, and by many outsiders too, Mademoiselle de Mornay was thought the most beautiful girl in Paris. She had great faults, of course, in some people's eyesfaults which especially vexed her aunt-her indifference to the world, her dislike of theatres, her turn for religion and solitude, her dreamy carelessness about pleasing people, except, perhaps, some stupid old woman to whom she suddenly chose to devote herself. Among her aunt's friends she was both haughty and shy; yet they admired her, and

Madame de Belleville, lamenting one moment with her husband over Clotilde's terrible manner, would rejoice the next over her beauty, her distinguished air, and her true nobleness and goodness of heart. If Clotilde did not enjoy Paris for herself, she did for Adèle, to whom she wrote long letters every week, describing everything she had seen and done.

The winter months went by, and spring came, and Madame de Belleville began to be troubled with rather serious thoughts about her niece's future. She had quite made up her mind that Clotilde should make a great match. Now that she was herself so much interested in her niece, M. de Vaux seemed hardly good enough. More distinguished men professed such admiration for Clotilde, that the difficulty of her small fortune might not be insurmountable; and M. de Vaux seemed to have given up the idea, for he had not appeared in Paris all the winter, and his friends said he was spending it in Rome. Apparently Mademoiselle Clotilde's coldness last summer had discouraged him. Madame de Belleville was not sorry.

But she found her charge a very difficult one, though Clotilde herself was always gentle and submissive, and nothing more was heard of the apparently faithless René. In the course of the winter, two gentlemen had been proposed to Clotilde,

both of them men of larger fortune and more attractive looks than M. de Vaux. She at once refused them both, and Madame de Belleville was softhearted enough not to persecute her on the subject. But about a month ago a third had offered himself, a distant cousin of M. de Belleville's. was a handsome young man, rich, of a good old Legitimist family, a favourite with all his relations, who did not altogether approve of his proposal. Their objections were, of course, on the score of Clotilde's small fortune. But Casimir de Belleville was a man of artistic tastes, and had honestly fallen in love with Clotilde for her own sake. His father and mother did their part graciously, and Madame de Belleville was in raptures. It was impossible that Clotilde could find any objection to that charming Casimir.

But he was refused, just as decidedly as the others had been, and Clotilde's obstinacy began to be a little too much for her aunt's endurance. It was becoming wicked ingratitude. What could she expect? what objection could she have to Casimir? Was it possible that she could degrade herself by still letting her thoughts linger with that miserable young man in the provinces, who had forgotten her long ago? "No," Clotilde answered proudly, and then she tried to make a civil speech about Casimir de Belleville.

Of course he was charming, and she was sorry to vex her dear aunt—but he was an infidel, he believed nothing, he never went to church. "If ever I do marry, Aunt Victorine," said Clotilde, "he must be a Christian. Oh, I should be too miserable! But indeed I would rather not marry at all."

"Ma chère, if you have taken that into your head," said Madame de Belleville, "you probably will not marry at all. We must be satisfied with our own Christianity, little one, in these days. And you, at any rate, have enough for yourself and your husband too. It is a pity, though, that it does not teach you a little obedience."

Nothing more was then said about Casimir de Belleville, but Clotilde's aunt told the story as a joke among her friends. She wrote rather strongly to M. de Mornay on the subject of Clotilde's obstinacy, without entering much into particulars of the good matches the girl had refused. M. de Mornay was very angry. He wrote a stern letter to Clotilde, telling her that her marriage was an absolutely necessary thing, that he could not afford to have such a fanciful young person in his family—that, in short, he insisted on her obeying her aunt, and entering at once into any arrangement she thought best for her. Mademoiselle Jourdain also wrote strongly and sorrowfully to her former pupil,

showing her, though not, one would think, without serious twinges of conscience, how her first duty was to sacrifice herself. It was the old-fashioned French spirit, which used to find voice in such books as Madame le Prince de Beaumont's Instructions pour les Jeunes Dames. "Je vous assure qu' une chrétienne qui si marie par obéissance à ses parens, fait toujours le mariage le meilleur et le plus avantageux pour elle, quand même elle épouserait le plus désagréable et le plus mallfonnête homme du monde."

Most people would sympathise with the independent and light-minded "Lady Lucie," whose argument is, "Mais enfin, ma Bonne, on se marie pour soi, et non pas pour ses parens." But she is soon instructed that there is no real evil but sin—that a bad husband is a passing trial, which gives one the opportunity for numberless acts of patience, thus greatly helping on one's sanctification—that if one obeys one's parents and does one's duty, the marriage, whatever it may be, must turn out to be the best thing that could have happened, if not for this life, for another.

The old Comte's commands and Mademoiselle Jourdain's sermon, thus coming together, took great effect on Clotilde's mind. Perhaps, if they had arrived sooner, M. Casimir would have received a different answer, for the girl felt now as if she was tired of a life of constant resistance. She said

nothing to her aunt of these letters, but waited on, in a sort of quiet hopelessness, to see what fate had in store for her.

As they moved slowly along in the string of carriages that afternoon, it was with almost a cry of joy that she recognised a lady's face in a carriage that was coming up beside them.

"Oh, ma tante! do you see? There is Madame de Champfort."

She hardly understood why that stern, handsome face was a welcome sight to her, but the fact is that it was Mornay—it was honour, charity, religion—it was Thérèse's mother, René's cousin—it was something different, or seemed so to her, from her aunt's soft, unprincipled, half-mocking good nature, her uncle's luxurious invalidism, the light, heartless, butterfly life of Paris, with its fashion and infidelity.

"Ah, madame," murmured Clotilde, "I am charmed to see you again."

"Here you are at last!" cried Madame de Belleville. "I thought the provinces had swallowed you up for ever. But what charming weather! And how is our dear Léontine? Ah, there she is, as blooming as ever! and the sweet little Thérèse, where is she? Bon jour, Monsieur Charles! you are very well, I hope."

Charles de Champfort, the youngest son, was in

attendance on his mother and his pretty sister, Madame du Château Mont d'Or. This young marquise had been very ill all the winter, and her mother had been watching over her at the old château in Burgundy.

"Yes, here we are at last," said Madame de Champfort. "I have cured Léontine, you see, and now we are all together, except Thérèse. I expect her from Champfort by-and-by, with her father; they have been there for the last month. Paris is looking more beautiful than ever. How do you do, Clotilde? have you passed a happy winter? Things must be going on well with you, my dear Victorine; you look younger every year. How is Monsieur de Belleville?"

All the enquiries were answered, plans for meeting again were hastily made, and Madame de Champfort's carriage moved gradually on in advance. Léontine made a few exclamations to her mother and brother on the lovely girl with Madame de Belleville: could that be little, shy, insignificant Clotilde de Mornay?

"She has a very good aunt," said Madame de Champfort, "who, I suspect, has found her a little troublesome, from what I have heard. That girl has a character."

"To be sure, mamma! you told me the history. Well, she looks like the heroine of a romance," said Madame du Château Mont d'Or, rather wearily. "That poor Adrien will be more in love than ever, if he sees her again now. And what has young René done with himself, after all?"

"I have neither heard nor seen anything of him lately," said Madame de Champfort. "He has gone quite mad with his English ideas. I should not have thought that poor Marie's son could have turned out so ill-bred and absurd. But, after all, she was a foolish creature."

"Then you have changed your mind about marrying him to Thérèse?" said Léontine.

She spoke in a low, languid, indifferent voice, her eyes wandering here and there. If there ever had been any enthusiasm, any interest in life for her, it had faded out long ago.

"At present, certainly, I do not feel amiable towards René," said Madame de Champfort. "Some day he may possibly find his way back into favour; it will not be his mother's fault if he does not. But really Thérèse wearies me with her fancies. One would think she meant to set up for an old oddity like Aunt Marie. Young people in these days are too unmanageable. Nevertheless, you are a good boy, Charles—and as to Léontine, she knows she is an angel."

"A poor angel!" said Léontine, half under her

breath. "Mon Dieu! the angels are not to be envied, if they are like me."

Clotilde was a good deal excited by the meeting with these old acquaintances, who reminded her of so much that was both happy and dreadful. She thought herself, considering all things, the most unfortunate girl in the world; but if she had known the whole life-history of that graceful, languid, beautifully-dressed Madame du Château Mont d'Or, a girl only three or four years older than herself, it is likely that she would have discovered her mistake. Unhappy as she might be, Madame de Belleville thought she had never seen her niece looking so wonderfully pretty as she did that afternoon, with a flush in her cheeks and a certain eagerness of expression as she watched the passing faces. After so unexpectedly seeing the Champforts, it seemed as if anybody might appear in the crowd; but though admiring eyes enough were turned on Mademoiselle de Mornay, who sat unconscious of them all, none met hers with a familiar glance—none, till suddenly a hat was taken off; a grave, dark man was riding by the carriage door, speaking to Madame de Belleville, bowing low to Clotilde with an earnest, empressé manner.

She perceived, rather unwillingly, that the Vicomte de Vaux looked well on horseback, and that there

was something about him impossible to define, but very different from most of the people she had met that winter. This impalpable difference struck her so strongly, though he only talked to them for a few minutes in the most commonplace way, that, after he was gone, she asked her aunt what it was.

"I do not know indeed, my child," said Madame de Belleville, "except that they say he is religious, and has a madness for speaking the truth. That, of course, is singular, and you probably admire it, as it is like yourself. Otherwise, I think M. de Vaux is only made peculiar by his awkward manners. He is the most terrible person to talk to, even for five minutes, that I ever met in my life. He has absolutely no conversation."

It was true that M. de Vaux could not be described by his best friends as a success in society. His rôle in Paris was the same as it had been in the country—to stand near Madame de Champfort with an immovable face, and to answer in as few words as possible when she or anyone else spoke to him. And yet he gave one the idea of being born for better things, and any sincere person who took pains to draw him into conversation soon found that he was capable of them.

After that meeting in the Bois, Clotilde saw him constantly, for he was always with the Champforts,

to whom Madame de Belleville seemed inclined to devote herself. Clotilde had a way of feeling lonely in Paris, and M. de Vaux looked as if he might be lonely too—as if he was not very happy, any more than herself. He had never talked much, but here he was more silent than ever; he did not smile at the chatter that went on around him; the witty speeches, the jokes, the stories, they were all lost upon him, and Clotilde, who often hated them, felt a strange bond of sympathy between herself and the stolid Vicomte.

One evening, she had been dining with her aunt and uncle at the Hôtel Champfort, and enjoying its rather stern, old-fashioned magnificence, after the modern luxury of Madame de Belleville's apartment. After dinner, in the salon, she was sitting a little in the background. She was the only young girl present. The circle near her was made up of married women-Madame de Champfort, her daughter Léontine. Madame de Belleville, and two or three other Standing round about them were a few gentlemen-M. de Belleville, M. de Vaux, Charles Clotilde knew them all de Champfort, and others. by sight, and knew their opinions on most subjects, but she listened to their talk with a little more interest than usual, because Madame de Champfort was at the head of it, and she had opinions of her own which sometimes sounded strangely in a Paris salon. They were talking of a play which had lately been brought out at the Français, called "La Paysanne," or some such name. Nobody disputed the genius, the wit that had created its scenes and conversations; it was simply brilliant, and the fashion just then was to rave about it, to go to see it again and again, to laugh, to cry, to give one's self completely up to the fascination of its alternate liveliness and pathos. Madame de Belleville had laughed and cried as heartily as anybody, and had even suggested to her husband, in her niece's presence, the idea of taking Clotilde to see "La Paysanne."

"You know best, my dear friend," said Monsieur de Belleville. "But my advice is, leave la petite at home. The play is perhaps a little too realistic for children like her."

"My child," said Aunt Victorine, "you really must make haste and be married. I shall die of disappointment if you miss seeing 'La Paysanne.'"

Now, in Madame de Champfort's salon, people were talking about this play, describing it in the most rapturous way to her and Léontine.

"Of course, you know," said one lady, "it is impossible for girls. But heavens! the wit, the charm—Mademoiselle Canot's manner, her look, her tones of voice—it is distracting. Even my husband,

the most hardened creature in Paris, was absolutely sobbing in that last scene. You cannot deny it, Adolphe! the tears were running down your cheeks."

"I have not often felt so hysterical, it is true," said her husband.

Madame de Champfort nodded her astonishment, her belief of all this, which was earnestly confirmed by every one in the circle. Then, rather to their surprise, she turned to her grave satellite, M. de Vaux. Clotilde's eyes unconsciously followed hers. M. de Vaux stood as usual, motionless, and taking no part in the conversation. With one hand he grasped the back of a chair, with the other he smoothed his moustache; his eyes were fixed on a distant corner of the room, and his forehead was slightly wrinkled with something that looked like displeasure.

"And you, monsieur," said Madame de Champfort, half playfully, "have you seen 'La Paysanne'?"

"Madame, I am ashamed to say that I have."

"Indeed! you did not find it so charming, then?"

"I found it odious. But I am not a judge of plays, madame, and I shall not venture to say more. Perhaps it is better not to discuss the morality of these things. My ideas are behind the times; they are not Parisian."

Clotilde felt, rather than saw, the Vicomte's quick glance at herself as he suggested that such things had better not be discussed.

Madame de Champfort said, gravely and pleasantly —"I think it is not unlikely that I should agree with you, my friend."

Some of the others smiled, but did not attempt any argument. Madame de Champfort instantly began on another subject, and "La Paysanne" seemed to drop at once out of everybody's mind.

Early the next day, as Clotilde and her bonne were coming away from the church where they went to mass every morning, M. de Vaux, also coming out, passed them close to the door. He bowed low, and Clotilde's smile in return brought a sudden light into his face.

To this girl, after a winter spent among Madame de Belleville's friends in Paris, it was almost a happy revelation to meet with one man who still called himself a Christian, and was not ashamed of the name.



CHAPTER XII.

ARRANGED.

THÉRÈSE DE CHAMPFORT had been a good deal saddened by her experiences of that autumn and winter. To begin with, the months spent with the old aunt at Angers were so unbearably dismal, that she was glad enough when her mother sent for her and carried her off to Château Mont d'Or. She hated that part of France, and despised her brotherin-law; neither had she much sympathy with Léontine, who, by breaking down just now, hindered them all from going to Paris as usual. Not that Thérèse cared much for Paris; she would rather have stayed at Champfort, where she found many occupations, and liked making herself popular. But Madame de Champfort preferred keeping this troublesome daughter under her own eye. So Thérèse was bored for the next few months in Burgundy, where

the winter seemed longer than any she remembered, where Léontine suffered and was peevish, and Léontine's husband, regretted by no one, spent as little of his time as he decently could. To make things a little less cheerful, Thérèse knew that her mother was in a bad humour with her, and her temper was spoiled by the feeling of being in disgrace. She had quite understood the plan of marrying her to René, and resented it while she laughed at it; she thought the treatment of Clotilde and René by their elders simply barbarous. But having no one to sympathise with her, she was obliged to keep her feelings in great measure to herself.

At last came spring. Madame de Champfort went with her eldest daughter to Paris, and Thérèse was rather pleased at being carried off by her father to Champfort. Here, under the care of her old governess, whom she ruled, she could do almost entirely what she liked.

Madame Prosper was a widow, a gentle, ladylike, well-informed woman, who had never possessed much influence over her pupils, except that of affection. This was according to Madame de Champfort's wish, for she would not have borne a rival on her throne. So perhaps it was fortunate that Madame Prosper had no pretension to be a second Jourdain. One of Thérèse's home amuse-

ments was to visit the poor people in the little town of Champfort. Her mother, who was very charitable, had set her an example in this, and allowed it to a certain extent. The curé, however, was doubtful; he thought that Mademoiselle Thérèse was scarcely grave and religious enough to visit the poor with any advantage either to them or herself. Among them she was extremely popular, almost too much so; old people were often reminded of the eccentric aunt who had lived at La Girouette years ago.

In the sweet spring weather, while she was really enjoying her days at home, and in no hurry to be summoned to Paris to join her mother, Thérèse received one morning a long letter from Madame de Champfort, containing a piece of news.

"I have to tell you of a charming marriage," wrote Madame de Champfort, generously ignoring the past. "Adrien de Vaux is going to marry your old friend Clotilde de Mornay. It is a perfect arrangement for both of them; her relations are delighted, Clotilde herself looks blooming, and Adrien told me yesterday that he was the happiest man in France. Your father and you will be here in time for the marriage, and I have suggested to Victorine de Belleville, who was a little puzzled how to arrange things, that Adèle and her nurse might travel to Paris with you. Clotilde has set her heart

on having the child here, and the Bellevilles, very naturally, cannot find room for Mademoiselle Jourdain as well. M. de Mornay will be only too glad to be left in peace. I have written about this to M. de Mornay, but you must go there with madame and settle it all. Another thing I want you to do for me. I believe the La Laurières are somewhere in the south, but I do not know their address. Drive round by La Girouette, and get it from the people there. I hope your father will bring you to Paris next week; you have been at Champfort quite long enough, and the marriage is fixed for the first week in May. Adrien talks of taking Clotilde to England to see the Exhibition, which will be an agreeable beginning for her. I hope you are taking care of your complexion, my dear child; this hot sun is very trying. You will find Clotilde wonderfully improved; her aunt has worked miracles."

"So she has, if she has made Clotilde consent to marry that stupid Adrien de Vaux!" Thérèse observed on this. "Poor child! Well, she will be good and contented, perhaps, which I should never be. Poor child, indeed!—little spiritless idiot, to let herself be dragged into such a marriage, when she might have known that René was only waiting for better days. Mamma is in a good humour at last;

she always is when she has gained her object, and, to do her justice, she generally does that."

So Thérèse took her meek companion, Madame Prosper, and drove off that very afternoon to Mornay. She found the household there in great excitement-Athanase all smiles. Perhaps it was spring that gave such a new feeling of life to the old place, rejoicing there in the sun after its unsheltered endurance of all the winter storms. The grass was growing, birds were singing in the cedar-tree, dogs barking in the yard; the creaking of a weathercock in the varying wind only added a little to the cheerfulness; lambs were running races on the lower slopes of the hill, and all the trees in the valley had put on soft green and red and yellow veils, while here and there an orchard full of white blossom, or a solitary tree, turned the country at once from a desert into a flower-garden. Adèle came dancing into the salon, followed by Mademoiselle Jourdain.

"Ah! she looks like spring," cried Madame Prosper.

Adèle was taller than in the autumn, but she still wore her little print frocks—a pink one to-day, that matched the soft roses in her cheeks; over it her dark curls streamed down longer than ever. Her eyes and mouth were smiling; she ran up to Thérèse,

who kissed her affectionately, touched by the child's sweet looks.

"Bon jour, mademoiselle. Well, little one, you seem very happy. Have you heard any good news?"

Mademoiselle Jourdain smiled rather sadly.

"Childhood is easily made happy, mademoiselle," she said. "We have had news, but you know it too, I am sure."

"Guess, then!" said Adèle. "Ah yes, you know. Clotilde is going to be married, and I am going to Paris, and then we shall all come back and live here again with grandpapa. Ah, what happiness! how magnificent!" and she made a little dance round Thérèse on the floor.

"Magnificent!" repeated Thérèse, looking at her.

"And you remember him—that good little M. de Vaux?"

"Yes—not very well," said Adèle, doubtfully. "He was not like Monsieur Renè—but they all went away so long ago. Grandpapa says he is very good and kind, and he is going to have new animals and new machines, and dogs and horses. And Clotilde will come back and live here again; she said so in a letter. Look, then, mademoiselle—here it is."

Adéle spread out on Thérèse's knee a sheet of crumpled note-paper. This letter of Clotilde's was

not long, and was blotted and badly written; it did not look like the production of such a gentle, civilised person as Mademoiselle de Mornay.

"My dear little angel," it began, "Aunt Victorine is writing to grandpapa, but I cannot let you hear my news from anyone but myself. It is that I am going to be married very soon to Monsieur de Vaux, who was staying last summer at Champfort, and came to dine with us one day-do you remember? The best thing is that we shall live at Mornay, and that you and I will be always together, my little love, and dear mademoiselle too. Tell her that I am trying to be good and obedient now, and that I hope I shall be happy, as she says that people that do right must be-and yet it does not matter much. I adore you, and I send you a thousand kisses. I am dving with impatience to have you in my arms again. Aunt Victorine says you must come; she will arrange that. Embrace grandpapa for me, and mademoiselle, and Nico.

"Your sister, who loves you with her whole heart,
"CLOTILDE,"

There'se was very far from being a sentimental person, but there were tears in her eyes as she gave the letter back to Adèle.

"Why do you cry?" said the quick-eyed child, in sudden alarm.

"I am not crying, my child," said Thérèse, gently.

"Or, if I am, it is because Clotilde loves you so much. I have not got a little sister, you know."

Adèle gazed at her in silence for a moment.

"Oh, I wish you had a little sister!" she cried, suddenly throwing herself into Thérèse's arms. "I love you, poor Mademoiselle Thérèse! I did not know you were so nice."

Thérèse returned the embrace warmly enough.

"Come," she said, half-laughing, "do not talk about me. All our thoughts must be for Clotilde now. I came to see if you could travel to Paris with papa and me."

"That would be too charming!" cried Adèle.
"Mademoiselle, shall I run and ask grandpapa?"

"Yes, do," said Thérèse, and Mademoiselle Jourdain nodded consent.

"What a little fairy!" said Madame Prosper, as Adèle darted away.

"Whose doing is it, after all, this marriage with Monsieur de Vaux?" asked Thérèse, in quite an altered voice. "What have you been preaching to that poor child, mademoiselle? I thought you were too good to encourage such heartless affairs. That letter to Adèle is simply terrible—heart-breaking.

Good and obedient—doing right—I detest such doctrines myself."

"My dear-" began Madame Prosper, faintly.

"Your opinions are not the fault of your bringingup, mademoiselle," said Mademoiselle Jourdain, with stern dignity. "You, who led our poor Clotilde into such misery last summer, have certainly no right to speak. She has come to her senses, and her true friends are thankful for it. Obedience is the highest of virtues, and will receive its reward even in this Clotilde submits to her grandfather; she life. makes the rest of his life happy. This marriage of hers is also advantageous for Adèle, and in marrying a good man Clotilde runs no risk for herself. These are not the days of romance, of foolish attachments, which bring far more sorrow than anything else. In any case, M. de la Laurière was not the person-

"You were told a great many lies about him, I have no doubt," said Thérèse.

" No, mademoiselle."

Thérèse shrugged her shoulders contemptuously.

"It is certainly consoling," she said, "to find that Clotilde's best friends are so perfectly satisfied. I should like to think that these bright prospects made her happy too."

Mademoiselle Jourdain stifled a sigh; for a

moment the look in her face was not far short of misery, but she hardened herself into her usual stern composure as Adèle came back into the room, leading her grandfather by the hand.

The two governesses sat apart by a window, and held their peace, while Thérèse and the Comte exchanged many compliments. M. de Mornay was in very good spirits, and talked cheerfully of his future grandson-in-law's plans for improving the estate, which had been discussed to a certain point last summer. He seemed to think that Mornay was to be renewed and to live again under the superintendence of that excellent De Vaux. Thérèse entered politely into all his expectations, and gave him her mother's message about Adèle, which he appeared to receive gratefully. But his manner had now become rather absent, and he hurried on to another subject.

"My dear mademoiselle, I am not mistaken, am I, in thinking that monsieur your father is at Champfort now?"

"Certainly, monsieur, he is there. Can he do you any service?"

"The fact is," said M. de Mornay, "I am troubled about my edition of Machiavelli. It is old, but not by any means one of the best. In one place it appears to me that his argument does not carry itself through, and I cannot divest myself of the idea that

a page is missing. I am indeed very much puzzled. Now monsieur your father has a splendid edition of the last century, printed at Florence. Do you think he could be prevailed upon to lend it to me?"

"I am quite sure, monsieur, that nothing would give him greater pleasure."

"You are an angel of benevolence. Though I believe M. de Champfort has never written a book, he will easily enter into an author's feelings—the desire of perfection, dear mademoiselle, which is at once the inspiration and the torment of a life like mine. I often wonder at myself for the hours I spend in work that finds its home in the waste-paper basket after all. Something has been forgottensomething might have been put in better, stronger language. As you work at a subject, its many sides come to light one by one. To an impartial mind it is almost agony. Sometimes I wake in the morning with a distaste to my work that borders on hatred. I even resolve to do no more, to leave this foolish country to work out her future for herself; but then comes a restlessness I cannot describe, which drives me against my will to the writing-table, to my old work again. But as to Machiavelli—a thousand pardons, mademoiselle! this cannot interest you, though your intelligent listening leads me on in spite of myself."

"Grandpapa," said Adèle, "Athanase picks up the papers that you tear in two, and sometimes he reads them to me. He says they are beautiful, but I don't believe he understands them, the words are so long."

"Athanase is a foolish old man," said the Comte, "and you are a spirit of mischief."

Before There'se went away, she talked a little more about Adèle and the journey, but did not feel sure that the Comte took in what she was saying. All his family might marry or die, she thought, without making themselves more interesting than that endless book. His last words were, as he politely handed her into the carriage—

- "Then you will not forget Machiavelli?"
- "Certainly not, monsieur. I hope you will continue to have good news of Clotilde. I will let you know the exact day of our going to Paris."
- "My edition is 1690. If I am not mistaken, that at Champfort is sixty or seventy years later."
- "Very probably. Adieu, monsieur," said Thérèse, waving her hand.
- "The poor old man is certainly mad," she murmured to herself as they drove down the hill.

She had told the coachman to drive to La Girouette, and while they went winding through the

cross-country roads, Madame Prosper did not find her an amusing companion. She sat silent, frowning, deep in unpleasant thoughts; this marriage of Clotilde's made her more angry the more she thought about it; she could not make the best of it, as all Clotilde's friends, even her little sister, seemed determined to do.

All the country was lovely in the freshness of spring; the fields and the roadside banks were gay with wild flowers. But Therese noticed nothing, till at last they turned in at an open gate, and drove between groups of old trees, beside a stream with bushes trailing into it, across a wide, undulating field, with glades here and there, where brown budding beeches clustered close together. Then came plantations of firs and other evergreens, and in the midst of these stood La Girouette, sheltered and sunshiny. One of the row of south windows opening to the ground was the front door, and out of this, just as the carriage drove up, came René de la Laurière, with a sporting dog at his heels. He looked very much astonished, took off his hat, and came forward.

"My dear, did you know——" began Madame Prosper, in a horrified whisper.

"No, madame. It does not signify. Bon jour, mon cousin! You are well, I hope?" and Thérèse

gave her hand to the young man as he stood at the carriage door.

"This is an unexpected pleasure. I only came yesterday. I thought you were all in Paris," said René, rather confused. "Will you and madame honour me by coming in?—not that the house is fit for you."

"No, thank you," said Thérèse, "we will stay here. We came to ask if anyone knew the address of madame your mother. She is in the south, is she not? My mother wished to write to her—I suppose to tell her this news."

There'se looked hard at her cousin, and René, earnestly returning her gaze, became as pale as death. Madame Prosper felt very uncomfortable, but was at a loss what to do.

"What news? I have heard none for months," said René.

Thérèse was neither daring nor ill-bred enough to talk English in the sole presence of poor madame, who did not understand it.

"Oh, the marriage that mamma has been planning for so long," she said, quietly. "She has gained her point at last—it is all arranged—they are to be married the first week in May."

"What—Monsieur de Vaux?" said René, biting his lip.

"Yes. Everyone seems delighted. All the Mornays are in raptures; we have just been there. You know Clotilde has been spending the winter in Paris with Madame de Belleville."

"And were you there—in Paris?"

"Oh no! I have been bored to death at Château Mont d'Or. I am going next week—madame and papa and I, and little Adèle de Mornay. It all sounds well, does it not? They are going to England to see the Exhibition."

"I am going to England too."

"Is it possible! Then you are not coming to Paris?"

"What have I to do in Paris?" said René, his eyes still fixed upon her with a sort of wild anxiety.

The scarcely perceptible movement of Thérèse's shoulders and eyebrows seemed to tell him something, if it was only that she despised his submissiveness. He was looking thin and worn; his lips trembled; his old air of glad enthusiasm had vanished—perhaps for ever. Still there came a bright look into his eyes as he said—

"Well, perhaps I may find my way to Paris before long. I have been expecting this news of yours, ma cousine, all the winter. The ménage will be charming."

"Oh, no doubt! I was surprised myself," said

Thérèse. "But you and I are too English, René. We are very rebellious young people, madame—we don't care for our pretty friend to marry old Monsieur de Vaux."

"He is an excellent man," said Madame Prosper.

"It is all arranged for the best."

"These things always are," said Thérèse. "Au revoir, then, René; I shall look forward to seeing you in Paris. Ah! my foolish head!—your mother's address. I came for nothing else."

"Her address! They are at La Laurière now."

"Thank you. That is enough. Adieu—à bientôt—we shall soon meet again."

René's conversation seemed to have quite deserted him. He kissed with an air of devotion the hand that his cousin gave him, bowed to Madame Prosper, and stood bareheaded in the sunshine while the carriage drove away, and for long after it had whirled out of sight round the shrubberies.

"Your manner to M. de la Laurière is not quite what it should be, dear Thérèse," said Madame Prosper. "A little too marked—you will not mind my saying so?"

"What can it matter, madame? I would do anything——" and Thérèse broke off with an impatient sigh.



CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAST EFFORT.

MADAME DE CHAMPFORT was a good deal annoyed when she heard from Madame Prosper of the meeting and conversation with René.

"You should have been a little authoritative, dear madame," she said. "You should have asked for his mother's address, and then insisted on driving away at once. He is the last person I wanted in Paris now. There'se is clever enough and malicious enough to break off twenty marriages. For such a young girl, her energy and her prejudices are something terrible. However, she will find that her influence here is not so great as at Champfort."

So Therese, arriving in Paris with her head full of rather undefined projects—to gain Clotilde's confidence once more, to save her from this stupid marriage, to bring her and René together, and triumphantly carry out that charming love-match—found herself met by serious obstacles. Her mother said nothing to her on the subject, but kept a quiet check on all her doings. A word to Madame de Belleville had doubled that good aunt's vigilance over Clotilde; she and Thérèse were never allowed to meet alone. Thérèse herself never went out, except with her mother or Léontine; Madame Prosper was not guard enough for her. So those days in Paris were very trying to the active mind of Mademoiselle de Champfort. René did not appear: the time of the marriage was fast approaching.

And Clotilde herself, with Adèle beside her once more, was not all unhappy. It seemed now as if those adventures of last summer were only a mirage, a dream, which no reasonable person could ever have expected to turn out a reality. There was some peace in pleasing everybody—in doing one's duty—and the future was not so bad, especially now that Adèle looked forward to it with such delight. Clotilde was tired; she had given up struggling, and that home-life at Mornay did look like rest. Monsieur de Vaux would not make much difference there, after all. He was a good man; he admired her very much, and wished to make her happy. The few talks she had had with him only deepened the feeling of confidence and trust which had drawn her

to him ever since he had appeared this time in Paris. This feeling was not love—very far from it; but many of Clotilde's countrywomen would have been glad to begin their married lives with anything so good. When René came into her mind, she recollected his falseness, and drove him out as quickly as possible, only wondering that there could be such cruelty in the world, and perhaps even now not half believing it. The first sight of Thérèse brought a sudden blush and a sharp pain at heart. Thérèse looked reproachful and sorry, but in the presence of mothers and aunts she could only look, and this was almost a comfort to Clotilde, who felt that she could never explain herself to Thérèse.

So the days ran on, among flowers and jewellery and pretty dresses, preparations of all kinds, in which Madame de Belleville and Adèle took a delighted interest, while the young future vicomtesse looked on with that faint twilight smile of hers, only just removed from total indifference. Many people in Paris talked of this marriage, and wondered at it. It seemed, indeed, marvellous that a girl should refuse Casimir de Belleville, and consent to marry that plain, awkward, silent De Vaux. The facts were considered so amusing, and the bride was so much admired, that Madame de Belleville expected many spectators besides her invited guests, both at the

civil marriage at the Mairie, and the religious ceremony in the Church of Saint Germain l'Auxerrois.

One lovely afternoon, Madame de Belleville was resting in her room after some hours of shopping on Clotilde's account. She expected M. de Vaux to come presently, and intended to go out driving with him and Clotilde. No young person, she flattered herself with reason, could have had a more devoted and useful aunt; and the virtue was all the greater, as she had never liked Clotilde's mother, poor Henri's wife, who had been saintly beyond endurance.

This afternoon it was not her fate to have much rest. The valet-de-chambre came to tell her that a gentleman was in the *salon*, who wished to see her on important business.

"Not Monsieur de Vaux, Hippolyte?" said the Comtesse, sleepily.

"Ah no, madame; a young gentleman. He did not wish to give his name, but he begged that madame would see him, if only for an instant."

"Very well, I will come," said Madame de Belleville.

Any new sensation was welcome, and it was with quite a pleasant little curiosity that she lifted the heavy velvet portière and advanced into the salon, where her visitor was walking restlessly up and down. The room was lovely—shaded by red sun-

blinds from the afternoon glare, all velvet and china and prismatic glass, great ferns and plants with heavy leaves standing tall and shadowy in windows and corners, a small wood fire burning low, a mixed scent of hyacinths and spring and some faint sweet perfume of Rimmel's.

The young man was well dressed; he had a quantity of curly auburn hair, and a handsome, pleasing face; but just now this was spoilt by a look of distracted melancholy.

"Madame, have pity on me! I am miserable!" he said, rushing forward to meet Madame de Belleville as she entered.

"I am extremely sorry to hear it, monsieur," said she. "Sit down, I beg, and tell me your misery. But I have not the honour of knowing who you are."

The Comtesse said this with some amusement: she liked handsome young men. He obeyed, and they sat down opposite to each other, Madame de Belleville looking so lazy and good-natured that her visitor began to despair a little less.

"What have I done?" he said. "Madame de Champfort will not see me; I have called there twice. It is only despair that has made me bold enough to come to you. I was perhaps mad to come to Paris at all; but oh! madame, can one give up

the hope of one's life without a word or look? It is impossible. I know she cannot be false to me of her own free will; she is forced into this marriage. Is it too late to say anything but adieu? Must we be sacrificed? Oh, madame, you must pity us!"

"Heavens! you are René de la Laurière!" said Madame de Belleville.

"I am that poor wretch. Madame, do you know that I have been living on hope all through this long winter, trying to persuade my father to propose for me to M. de Mornay, feeling sure that that sweet, noble girl would keep the promise that she gave me; and now I hear—But it is I that have a right to her, and no one else. Why should she marry this man, when she prefers me? Dear madame, what reason can there be? Is it too late?"

"Yes, weeks—months too late!" said Madame de Belleville, half touched, half angry. "You must know that very well. Family arrangements cannot be broken through as you seem to think, monsieur. I am sorry, but all that you say is quite wasted. These fine sentiments are all very well in poetry; people smile at them in real life. There—do not let me hurt your feelings—but pray control yourself, and spend these pretty thoughts on some other object. You might as well bestow them on a person already married as on my niece."

"Ah, madame!" sighed René, "your face is not so cruel as your words."

"I am not cruel at all," said Madame de Belleville. "I only ask you to be reasonable. We must all submit to fate, monsieur, once or twice in our lives. Your turn is come now. Go away and amuse yourself, and forget this foolish fancy."

"Will you grant us one little favour, madame?"

"If by 'us' you mean yourself and my niece," said Madame de Belleville, more gravely, "I must ask you to be good enough not to use that expression. She has nothing to do with you. She has not been forced into this marriage, as you said just now. This very winter she has refused better matches than M. de Vaux; she accepted him of her own free will. Therefore you will not allow yourself to say any more about that. What is this favour that you wish me to grant?"

"To let me see her for a moment—in your presence, madame, if you like!" said René, in a voice of such imploring despair that the Comtesse felt really sorry for him. But the amusing side of the question was too much for her.

"In my presence, monsieur! You are too obliging. No; it is much better for you not to see her now, and I am very sure that she would not wish to see

you. That is enough. If you take my advice, you will leave Paris."

"I do not know what will become of me," said René. "Oh, madame, you might save two lives, and you will not. Think what it is to feel one's self in the very same house with her—nothing but walls between us! Some men would refuse to leave the house without seeing her!"

"Some men would find themselves very much deceived, monsieur," said Madame de Belleville, coldly.

At that moment the voices of Clotilde and Adèle fell on her ear, and on his too: they were coming—they were in the ante-room; another moment, and Clotilde's hand would be on the curtain at the door.

Madame de Belleville rose up suddenly, fixing her eyes on René with a look of command that he did not know how to disobey.

"Stay where you are," she said in a low voice.

Then she walked out of the room to meet her nieces, stopping them in time, and letting the heavy curtain fall behind her.

"Go, my children. Do you hear me? Go back to your room, Clotilde. I will send for you when the carriage is ready."

"Are you ill, ma tante? You look so pale. Shall I call Clémentine?"

"No-nonsense! Do as I tell you."

Clotilde took Adèle's hand, and they went away. Madame de Belleville stood leaning against a table, listening. Some one was coming up the principal staircase. The next minute M. de Vaux appeared at the outer door.

"Madame, is anything wrong?" he exclaimed in some alarm.

"No," said the Comtesse, laughing, and speaking low. "I am only tormented to death by a young madman. I think he is harmless, however; he will not try to murder you. Come into the salon with me."

"Why should he wish to murder me?"

"I am afraid he hates you a little. I have just sent Clotilde out of his way."

The Vicomte stared; he was not fond of mysteries; but he followed Madame de Belleville into the salon. René was sitting where she had left him, his head bowed on his hands. He started up when they came in. The Vicomte bowed stiffly, recognising him at once. As to René, the sight of his rival seemed to restore the manliness that had left him. He stood up, looking flushed and proud, and Madame de Belleville felt a little real sympathy, as she contrasted him with Adrien de Vaux.

"We have met at Champfort, monsieur," said the Vicomte,

His manner was not very conciliatory; his voice was gruff; and he looked at René with an air of military sternness. The young man returned his look defiantly.

"I do not know you, monsieur," he said.

"You have a short memory," said M. de Vaux.

At that moment, fortunately, Hippolyte came to the door, and announced Madame de Belleville's carriage. The Comtesse looked at Adrien, and made a little gesture of despair. He frowned, and René might in another moment have found that he was seriously irritated. But the young fellow had just enough sense left to see that he had put himself in the wrong, and had better bring his useless visit to an end. He bowed very low to Madame de Belleville, and walked out of the room without speaking, followed by Hippolyte.

"That is a relief!" said Madame de Belleville, throwing herself into a chair.

"What is the matter with the young firebrand?" said the Vicomte. "At least—I suppose I understand his hating me. But last year—on my honour, I assure you, we all thought it was Mademoiselle Thérèse. They held the most amazing conversations, and, in fact, Madame de Champfort hinted that it was to be."

"She wished it-but young people are not so

easily managed," said Madame de Belleville. "This young man had set his heart on our treasure, it seems—English fashion, you understand, my dear Adrien, without anybody's leave or knowledge."

"Bah! he is a child—a fool," said the Vicomte, rather agitated. "And she, madame, perhaps——But I will not ask any questions. Why should I care to know?"

"Why indeed, my friend?" said Madame de Belleville. "You know her beautiful character; she has promised to become your wife. You would be unreasonable if you wanted more. But it is late, and I am forgetting our drive."

The good Vicomte was a little disturbed and anxious, for though he was very friendly with Madame de Belleville, she was not a woman that he trusted altogether. He was not quite happy till she came back with Clotilde, who met him as usual, with her sweet, frank smile.





CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE EXHIBITION.

THREE weeks later, a young and beautifullydressed French lady was sitting alone on a bench in one of the courts of the Exhibition in London. She did not seem much interested in all that was around her-in the strange people, talking a strange language, who passed up and down. kind women, who lingered near her for some time, and looked at her with sympathetic eyes, soon made up their minds that she was foreign, distinguished. and unhappy. Her eyes were so wistful and pensive. her face was so pale—she seemed so alone, so lonely among the crowds and the wonders of art. sighed, and they were half inclined to speak to her, to ask if they could be of any use, but a certain shyness and doubt of foreign women held them back.

The fact was that Clotilde was tired—ennuyée, and certainly for the moment lonely. This was the second day that she and her husband had spent at the Exhibition. She felt as if she had seen everything long ago. The noise and the glitter wearied her—the music, the people were all like sounds and figures in a dream. She longed to be back at Mornay—to begin her quiet life there, on the old hill, under the great summer sky—peaceful days with Adèle and Nico, books, needlework, the round of daily duty marked out by the Angelus bell.

Adrien was excellent, but just now his head was full of machinery for the model farm that he meant to make at Mornay. There could be no better place for studying new inventions than this great Exhibition, and to-day he was going into them thoroughly, with an engineer to help him. Clotilde did not like the idea of being left alone in the great English hotel, so she came with him, tried to be interested, and presently asked him to take her to some place where she could sit still and wait for him. So they chose this bench, with its back to a group of tropical plants, a palm-tree towering over all. She assured him, smiling, that she would not move, and should be very well amused. He left her there, and went back to his model ploughs and chaff-cutters.

Presently a young Frenchman came loitering

along by the cases of china opposite, half stopped when he caught sight of her, flushed very red, and, after a moment's hesitation, walked quickly on, and presented himself suddenly before her dreaming eyes. They woke into a sort of terror, as she found herself looking at René—his bright, curly head—his eager, excited face. Then she remembered everything, rose with quiet dignity, and held out her hand to him.

"It is you, monsieur!" said Clotilde, in her low, sweet voice. "I did not expect to see you here. Have you been in England long?"

"Only one week, madame," said René, restored to himself by her calmness, and yet more miserable than ever.

Pride and resentment refused to help him; he could scarcely hide his agitation in the presence of Clotilde, who evidently had never cared for him; still, with her eyes upon him, he could not make a fool of himself.

"Monsieur de Vaux is with you?" he said, suddenly struck by her being alone.

"Certainly. He is looking at the machinery. It is a great interest to him. He is coming back to fetch me in a few minutes."

"Well, I may talk to you till then?" said René, conquering himself more and more. "You must let

me have the honour of congratulating you on your marriage. I was not able to see you in Paris."

"Have you been in Paris?"

"Ah! Madame de Belleville was too much occupied with other things to tell you of my visit to her. Yes, I came in the hope of seeing you, but the moment was not favourable."

René's words and tone filled the young Vicomtesse with great surprise, which she was careful not to show to him. She felt it was all a mystery that she had better not try to understand now, and, wishing to turn the talk away from herself, she asked politely for his father and mother—what he had been doing all the winter—whether he was going back to France soon. He also made various enquiries for her family, especially for her dear little sister, who was so fond of fairy tales. Clotilde felt that recollections such as this were dangerous, but there seemed to be no avoiding them. René was just as impetuous, as unmanageable as ever.

"My cousin Thérèse told me the news of your marriage," said René. "I hastened to Paris to offer you my good wishes, but I failed, as I tell you. Now I am glad, very glad, to have this opportunity of speaking to you, and saying farewell for ever. I am going to join the exploring expedition to Africa, which starts from Paris in a fortnight. I want to see

what amusement one can find among fevers, and savages, and wild beasts, and unnavigable rivers."

"But is not that a very wild idea? What does madame your mother say to it?"

"I have told them both that I cannot stay in France. It is partly their own fault."

Clotilde could not help looking at him, and meeting his earnest gaze, in which there was both anger and sorrow. Her eyes, though she hardly knew it, were full of wondering reproach.

"No," he said, half under his breath, "not their fault—yours."

"Pardon! it is your own," murmured Clotilde.

"What can you mean? It is you who have forgotten, though you said you could not forget. I wait for months, struggling, not losing hope, trusting you entirely, and then I hear——Pray forgive me! You may well look angry. I am a miserable creature for reminding you, but when you say it is my own fault, that is too much."

Clotilde had turned deadly pale. She clasped her hands together and leaned forward, catching her breath in a sort of agony. René was frightened at her look, and muttered something that she did not hear. At last she spoke without raising her eyes.

"It is not wicked to explain to you. I see now—I broke my promise, and was very wrong. I was

deceived. I was told that you meant nothing—that you had said so, written so. I never saw you again. I was in Paris all the winter, and this spring—it looked like one's clear duty to obey. Grandpapa insisted—I need not say any more. I thought you had forgotten, or had never meant—that I had made a great mistake."

"Who told you?" said René, his voice trembling.
"Oh—I shall say no more. It does not matter now."

For two or three minutes they were both silent. Clotilde sat with her head bent, her eyes downcast and grave. René, looking at her pure, sweet profile, thought that she was praying, perhaps for him as well as herself. A soft little breeze found its way in and rustled the palm-leaves overhead—a breath of peace, as if an angel had passed by.

"Madame," said René, "I adored you then, and I adore you now. You will always be my guardian angel. But I will not trouble you with my presence any longer. Only remember me sometimes in your prayers."

"I will," she said. "But stay here until my husband comes."

"No, no, I cannot. Adieu!" said René, hastily.

He kissed her hand once, and walked quickly away, disappearing round the nearest corner.

Clotilde's two unknown English friends, curious and benevolent, had watched the scene from a distant seat, and of course drew their own conclusions. When a broad-shouldered, middle-aged Frenchman appeared almost immediately, and walked up to the young lady, they decided that he must be her father, and their minds were relieved by her at once taking his arm and going away with him.

"Have you seen young De la Laurière?" said M. de Vaux to his wife. "I met him just now, and he bowed to me. In Paris, a month ago, the fellow pretended to have forgotten me altogether. I don't understand these changes, but I suppose he is a miserable fellow—he!"

"He has been here, talking to me," said Clotilde.
"We are old acquaintances, you know. He is going to join the expedition to Africa."

Adrien made an exclamation of astonishment.

"That is very serious. But perhaps it will do him good; he wants a little steadying. It is just what I should have done myself, at his age. Well, my friend, I have ordered the most perfect model plough that you ever saw in your life. We shall have crops from those lower fields to astonish France. Are you very tired? You look pale. I was longer among that machinery than I expected, but one

cannot exhaust the wonder and the beauty of it. I am afraid you were ennuyée, though, in spite of De la Laurière and his African journey."

This was a long speech for M. de Vaux.

- "I am a little tired, I think, Adrien," said Clotilde, but not from sitting there."
- "We will go back to the hotel now. By-the-bye, where is he living, that young man? Is he alone in London? We might ask him to dinner."
- "I do not know," said Clotilde. "No, we need not do that. He said good-bye to me. I think he is going back to France at once."
- "Poor fellow! Well, Africa will do him good; he will rough it there, and come back a wiser man," said the Vicomte, kindly.

Clotilde was a little puzzled by her husband's manner, but she would have been surprised to find out then, as she did afterwards, that he knew the state of the case, or at least half of it, almost as well as she did herself. But it was only by degrees that she, who already honoured him so much, would learn to know the heights and depths of Adrien's character.



CHAPTER XV.

PEACE AND WAR.

IGHT uneventful years—and yet one has no L right to call them so—marked by so many natural events, births, and deaths, and marriages in the families of one's friends. But they were quiet years, and had passed quickly. The changes that had come to Mornay had stolen on unconsciously. The old Comte had gradually been conquered by weariness, and had passed away to a full understanding of all systems of government, leaving his manuscripts behind to be locked up by reverent hands among the family papers. He had lived long enough to take his first great-grandchild into his arms, and to call him Henri, after himself and his eldest son. Since the Comte's death there had been another child, a little fair-haired girl, and now these two were playing on the terraces as if there was no such thing as trouble in the world—the happiest of children, hardly knowing who was their best friend among all the loving guardians that surrounded them—their father, their mother, their young aunt Adèle, Mademoiselle Jourdain, old Athanase, who still reigned over the servants of the château.

It seemed as if old Mornay-le-Haut had lost its feeling of lonely exaltation in the land. Perhaps with this it had lost something of its picturesque romance. The wild hill with its steep slope remained the same; so did the château and the buildings close to it; but the yard was smart and clean, the walled garden was full of fruit and flowers, the terraces were mown and watered and planted with flowering shrubs, the road up the hill was even and good, and had been cleverly engineered into a less trying steep-The wild, heathy heights and slopes behind the château had become vineyards and young firwoods, protected by hedges, with roads cut through here and there. These wound round the shoulder of the hill to the great new farm-buildings, where cowhouse rivalled stable in cleanliness and almost luxury, where the great machines stood under their separate sheds, and the corn and hay were stored in barns, and the vats and cellars were ready for the vintage of red wine, and the pans of cream in the dairy stood on spotless bright-red tiles.

M. le Vicomte and his farming were by this time famous in the country-side. He set an example to his neighbours which they were slowly beginning to follow: his carts rolled constantly through the wondering village: the hopeless old Mornay property was paying as it had never paid before. Scientific men came from far away to see the model farm, and to set forth their various theories to M. de Vaux, who had plenty of his own, and practical ones. He wrote farming articles in the newspapers, received prizes and compliments from the Société d'Agriculture of the department. Thus the former Chasseur d'Afrique had found his vocation.

All through the early summer of 1870, people's minds were rather disturbed about politics, but the real anxiety in France was small, and life went on in its harmonious peace from day to day. Quiet people in the provinces, believing at any rate much of what they heard of the power and greatness of France, were certainly not haunted by any serious fear of the future.

One day in that July, Thérèse de Champfort—she was still unmarried—came to pay a visit at Mornay with her brother Charles. She and her mother lived a great deal at Champfort now; her father was dead, and Léontine also. Her brother the Marquis had

married a gay and rich wife, who seldom chose to exile herself to Champfort for more than a month in the year. There'se and her mother, thus left to each other—Madame de Champfort having almost resigned herself to her daughter's not marrying—were better friends than they had ever been before, and made life interesting by a great deal of active charity.

The ladies were sitting on the terrace, in the shadow of the old cedar, deep and black as in summer days long vanished. Everything was silent in the heat and heavy stillness of July, but the children were laughing and chattering and running out into the sunshine, called back now and then by their elders. Charles de Champfort had walked off to look for the Vicomte, who was sure to be somewhere on his farm. Mademoiselle Jourdain, looking darker and more sunburnt than ever under her large white hat, came marching from the garden with a basket of fruit, and the children ran shouting to meet her. Clotilde and Thérèse sat on low chairs under the tree, with Adèle on the grass at their feet. The visitor looked well; there was something more satisfactory than of old in the keen glance of her bright eyes-more kindness and less mischief, per-Madame de Vaux looked pale and languid and delicate, and her brown eyes were larger and more wistful than ever; but her smile was very

sweet, and in the pensive gentleness of her looks there was no shade of discontent. Still the contrast was striking between her and her young half-sister. Adèle was seventeen now, just growing up, but the awkwardness of girlhood had never existed for her. She was almost as dark as a gipsy, with the same rich colour that flushed up in an instant under the transparent skin. Her black eyes, under their long, curly lashes, looked as soft as velvet, and were full of laughing fun; her features were as daintily perfect as her small, graceful figure. This was her natural place, sitting at her sister's feet, looking up with loving anxiety into her face; no one had ever come between her and Clotilde. Madame de Belleville, who was charmed with the child at the time of Clotilde's marriage, had several times offered to take charge of her, but Clotilde appealed to her husband, and they both refused to part with Adèle. She should never be brought up in that school, Clotilde resolved; and she thought in her heart, if she did not say as much, that Adèle should never suffer as she herself had suffered.

"How peaceful it is here!" said Thérèse. "My dear Clotilde, this place makes me feel young again. What a strange world it is! By-the-bye, I have some news for you. It is about my cousin René. You remember him?"

"Perfectly," said Clotilde, with a faint, sad smile.

"Is he coming home at last?"

"He is come already, the good-for-nothing—so altered, they say, that nobody would know him. Not much wonder, after all these years of Africa. The astonishing thing is that some of these lions and elephants have not made an end of his foolish life, or the fevers he has had, or the horrid cannibals who have entertained him so kindly. Now I suppose every one will think him a hero. And I really believe he has discovered where some little branch of a river flows to. How easily people can make heroes of themselves now-a-days!"

"It is a pity they do not, more of them," said Adèle.

"Are you angry with me, petite? What have I said?"

"You laugh at Monsieur René, and I believe he is a real hero—at least he must be much braver than most men. Why do you call him foolish and goodfor-nothing, pray?"

"Because I am sorry for his mother," said Thérèse, "whose only son has left her for all these years, just to amuse himself. It is simple selfishness. Many men who like adventures just as much as he does have to do without them. Do you remember him well, Adèle? You were very young when he went away."

"Oh yes," said Adèle, blushing suddenly, "I remember Monsieur René very well. I remember the last time I saw him."

"They have welcomed him home gladly enough," said Thérèse. "Madame de la Laurière wrote quite a distracted letter to mamma about all his perfections. I wonder if he will come to La Girouette. Charles agrees with you, Adèle; he thinks him such a fine fellow, though before he went away he rather disliked him. Well, we shall have to listen to his adventures, and clap our hands politely."

For a minute or two they were all silent—even Adèle a little grave, as she remembered the enthusiasm of her childhood. A faint tinge of colour came into Clotilde's cheeks; she too had her memories. And Thérèse thought of her fine plans, how they had been partly realised on this very terrace, on a moonlit summer night like these. She looked round her, up at the white walls of the château, down into the green shadows and flashing water of the valley, and she said, as if following up her thoughts—

"After all, nothing could be more charmingly peaceful than this. One understands it now a little. It is a happy sort of life, is it not, Clotilde? Every one loves you, and you see your children growing. It all goes on just the same from day to day, without

any catastrophes. In fact, it is peace. Are you contented, my dear?"

Clotilde nodded and smiled. Her eyes were full of tears; she looked down, and met Adèle's loving gaze.

"Yes, she is contented," said Adèle. "We all love her—you know that. And we should be contented too if she was stronger, and had rosy cheeks like mine."

The children's happy voices came calling along the terrace—"Mamma!—Tante Adèle!—Mademoiselle!—will you have some raspberries? Mademoiselle has them in her basket—oh, such great ones!"

Then, a minute or two later, the group under the cedar was joined by the two gentlemen, M. de Vaux in a linen jacket and a large Panama hat. In those years the worthy Vicomte had grown fatter and greyer; his appearance was not improved, but he was more sociable; perhaps his new popularity and farming fame in the neighbourhood made him so. But Clotilde, looking up to welcome him with a smile, felt sure from the anxious thoughtfulness of his answering glance that something was wrong. Having politely greeted Mademoiselle de Champfort, he came round and stood by his wife, with his hand on the back of her chair.

"We have brought you some news, ladies," said Charles de Champfort, cheerfully.

- "Bad news, then, monsieur," said Madame de Vaux.
- "How do you guess that, madame? Myself, I am inclined to call it good."
- "I know it by my husband's face," said Clotilde.

 "He does not think it good, and I shall certainly agree with him. What is it, Adrien?" she said, turning round, and laying her hand on his.
- "War is declared, mon amie—war with Germany. I have been telling Charles that my present occupations make me a man of peace. So I am sorry—but there is a great deal in what he says. Listen to him, and you may share his enthusiasm."
- "War! What will happen to us?" said Clotilde, half breathlessly.

She held out her arms to the children, who both rushed into them, a wild mass of crumpled frocks, and sun-brown and fair hair streaming.

"What will happen to us, madame?" said Charles, laughing. "Ask what will happen to the Germans! I can soon give you the history of our campaign. Think of our splendid army, strong enough to conquer Europe."

"But, my dear Charles, we surely do not wish to conquer Europe!" said Thérèse.

"Not at all; I was only reminding Madame de Vaux of our strength. On the contrary, our object is to gain, as quickly as possible, a universal and lasting peace. That can never be as long as the Prussians continue their daily insolences; they must have a severe lesson. We shall fight—of course we shall beat them—we march to Berlin—make our triumphal entry there—return to Paris covered with glory. There is the programme of events, madame. I know nothing to prevent its being carried out."

Charles's hopefulness was infectious, and Thérèse and Adèle joined in asking him a string of eager questions. M. de Vaux smiled under his moustache at the enthusiasm of these young people, and Clotilde, holding her children tight, leaned her fair head back against his arm. Mademoiselle Jourdain stood in the background, silent, holding her basket of raspberries.

Late that evening, when the visitors were gone back to Champfort, and little Henri and Antoinette were asleep in their beds, Clotilde and Adèle sat with Adrien on the terrace, and drank their coffee by moonlight, and talked politics in a quieter strain. Adrien had not Charles de Champfort's certain faith in the army; he did not much believe in the generals, or in the Government that directed them, and he even feared that over-confidence might be their ruin.

"I cannot believe it; but if the army failed, there would be the Garde Mobile," said Adèle; "so at least France cannot be conquered."

- "Heaven forbid!—did I suggest such a thing?" said the Vicomte. "Yes, there is the Garde Mobile. And prepare yourselves, my dear friends; if it is called out here, I shall probably have to go and drill the fellows."
 - "Oh, Adrien!"
- "Yes, dearest. Look at Josset, and Binas, and little Pierre Moret. What sort of defenders will they make for the country, as they are? But a month or two's drill may make soldiers of them."
- "Ah well, poor fellows! All you Frenchmen will do your duty, that is certain; and we poor helpless ones must try and do it too, Adèle. But I did not know, when I woke this morning, that it was my last quiet waking for many a day."
- "Thérèse de Champfort said that perhaps she and her mother would go and nurse the wounded," said Adèle.

" After all, vive la France!" said the Vicomte.

He walked forward to the edge of the terrace, where Clotilde was already standing. She half turned to meet him, and put her hand into his arm. Adèle sat still and watched them, and thought a little of her old friend René. He, who was so fond of adventures, could not surely stay at home now—and yet what a misfortune for his poor mother!



CHAPTER XVI.

THE CHÂTELAINE.

WHEN Clotilde talked of having had her last quiet waking for many a day, she was nearer the truth than any of them thought. With such terrible swiftness came the discovery that all French hopes were vain, that each piece of bad news, following on its forerunner, seemed hardly to be a blow in itself, but only an intensifying of the first blow of all. By the middle of September France was in despair, though she fought on. She had made up her mind that her beautiful Paris was doomed. People talked quietly, with bleeding hearts, of the fate of Babylon and of Jerusalem. By that time nearly every man in France was somehow engaged in the defence of his country; there were few families who did not already mourn the loss of some dear soldier.

M. de Vaux had long ago gone to drill the Garde Mobile, and had remained with them to fight. Charles de Champfort, as well as René de la Laurière and many other young men, had joined themselves as scouts to the battalion of Zouaves under the brave M. de Couëssin. The great grievance of all these gallant volunteers was that their generals-in-chief would not lead them straight against the Prussians, no matter how far they were outnumbered, to drive the invaders back, or die.

When Thérèse de Champfort talked of nursing the wounded, she had had notions of putting on a white cap and apron, and going with her mother to some place on the frontier; but before Madame de Champfort could make any such arrangement as this, the frontier and far beyond it was in German hands, and her son soon advised her to set up a hospital in her own town, which seemed likely to be quite near enough to the seat of war. And so, in truth, as the long agony went on, through beautiful September, wet, dreary autumn, and bitter winter slowly advancing, while Frenchmen kept up their brave, hopeless struggle against the invading flood, these ladies, and many like them, found plenty to occupy their hands and hearts. In the little town of Champfort, as in the larger towns of Le Mans, Orléans, and many others, they had no time to sit and weep over their own losses, or to brood over their own anxieties. Every moment, every possession was given up to their poor wounded. Madame de Champfort collected her friends round her, and they all worked together with one soul. All selfishness was laid aside; patriotism and pity were the ruling powers. People thought no more of the parties into which they had been divided, of this ruler or that; they were working as the soldiers were fighting—for France. Such a fire as this must be a refining one, and a nation must come forth from it greater and purer and better; its enemies cannot hinder such consequences as those.

Madame de Champfort had refused to let the Vicomtesse de Vaux join her band of nurses; and, indeed, in any ordinary times one would have said that a delicate woman like Clotilde had enough to do at home. She and Mademoiselle Jourdain, always her right hand, did their best to look after the poor, neglected farm, left to ruin by its master and all his men. For Adrien, his old soldier spirit strong in him, had come home once, and carried off to the war every man in Mornay who would follow him, so that there was nothing left but a population of women, and old men, and children. The women in those parts, to be sure, could work as well as the men, but many of them had not much heart for it, poor things.

Athanase missed the handy lad who of late years had helped him in his house-work and waiting; he was of opinion that a woman could not polish floors, or whiten the flags in the hall. But indoors or out, in château, and garden, and farm, women had to do their best that year; the young châtelaine found it no easy task to keep things going at all, even with the loyal help of her friend and her sister. Adèle took entire charge of the children in the day, and at night she and they slept in Clotilde's room. were winter nights to be remembered, when the Prussians were reported to have been seen here, there, everywhere, a few leagues off, and when Clotilde lay pale and wide awake, with her candle and her dressing-gown close by, ready to go down herself and receive them courteously, the surest way of saving her people from ill-treatment and her house from desolation.

Such old châteaux as Mornay are dismal places on a night in winter, when the wild winds sigh along the corridors, doors and windows rattle, ghostly footsteps sound, and the air outside is full of strange cries. In times of peace, Mornay on its hill was a very centre of storms; but how much worse was it in time of war, when that wild rattling and groaning might not be all the wind, but distant guns, perhaps, or Uhlans riding up the road. In such nights hardly anyone slept, except Adèle and the children.

One dark night, when the wind was howling as usual, and showers of frozen snow were driving against the windows, Clotilde, lying awake, was sure that she heard some other noise—a rumbling of wheels when the storm lulled itself for an instant. It was after midnight; the wood-fire on the hearth had burnt low. As she lay and listened, all her senses painfully intent, a real, loud noise made her start and spring up suddenly. There was a sharp, repeated knocking at the house door, as if those outside neither could nor would wait to be let in. A moment afterwards, as Clotilde was hastily preparing to go downstairs, old Athanase knocked at her door, and half opened it. Adèle started up at the same moment, and Mademoiselle Jourdain came in past Athanase in her nightcap, wrapped in a large shawl.

"I came to say that Madame la Vicomtesse must stay where she is," said Athanase, looking in. "I am going down to open the door to them."

"I must decidedly go myself, Athanase," answered Clotilde. "The head of the house must receive them. You can go with me, if you like."

"I am obliged to you, madame," said the old man, ironically.

"But listen, my dear child," said Mademoiselle Jourdain, catching Clotilde by her two hands—"stay here with the children. I will go down and represent you; that will be much better."

"No, dear mademoiselle. If you wish to make me happy, remain in this room with Adèle and the children."

"I am coming with you, Clotilde," cried Adèle, eagerly.

"No, petite. Dress yourself quickly, and the children too."

The young Vicomtesse seemed to have taken a sudden authority on herself. She kissed the children, who had just opened their sleepy eyes, and were looking up in wonder; she kissed her hand to Adèle and Mademoiselle Jourdain. Then she took a candle, and went out into the corridor, with all her brown hair streaming down over her shoulders, a bright, determined look in her eyes and a colour in her cheeks. Athanase was shuffling along in front, an oddly dishevelled old figure. He peeped out of one of the windows as they passed along.

"There are lanterns, and there seem to be waggons. It is perhaps a train of artillery," said Athanase. "Ah, without doubt; this is a commanding position."

"Why do you stop, Athanase?" asked his mistress, impatiently. "We must not keep them waiting."

She hurried on, as she spoke, down the broad staircase, while a fresh volley of knocks sounded at the door. Athanase had to make all haste to overtake her before she reached it, flying across the hall.

"Wait a moment, madame!" he implored, breathlessly. "These monsters will eat everything in the larder before we have time to look round, and make fires with the furniture. Let us parley with them. Let me fetch M. le Comte's pistols; they are only in the library. I will persuade them that the house is defended."

"Quelle bétise!" You will do nothing of the sort. Unbar the door at once, or I will do it myself—do you hear?"

For another moment they stood shivering inside their great old door, while the invaders outside were strangely quiet, perhaps aware of lights and voices. Then Athanase undid the bars and the heavy bolts, and Clotilde herself threw open the door, standing there with her old servant, two helpless creatures indeed, to meet the sudden rush of driving wind and beating snow, and—Prussian artillerymen?

"Mon Dieu!" cried a woman's voice; "what is the matter, my dear Clotilde? You look tragic. Ah!

you thought we were the Prussians. No, not yet; not quite so bad as that. Ah! what weather!"

"Go in, then, ladies; make haste, make haste!" cried the respectable curé of Mornay, as he gently pushed forward Madame de Champfort, muffled beyond knowledge in wet cloaks and shawls.

"Oh, madame, you are welcome indeed!" cried Clotilde, receiving the Marquise in her arms. "But are they at Champfort?"

"By this time they are. I have taken flight with all my household. My child, I have brought them here in waggons, and my twenty poor wounded too. It was for their sake I came. I could not leave them to the mercy of the Germans. Myself, I should have stayed. The château will be ruined. Here is Thérèse—here is Marie de la Laurière; my other friends have gone to their homes. You will receive us all, will you not, dear Clotilde? We have brought all the provisions we could lay hands on, and that good curé of yours has been helping us up the hill."

"Dear madame, we will do our very best," cried Clotilde, in joyful excitement. "Athanase, we must light fires everywhere. Where are the other servants? Bring in the poor wounded as quickly as you can—make beds for them in the dining-room. Monsieur le Curé will stay and help us.

Madame, you are frozen—you are fainting from the cold."

Clotilde advanced hospitably to poor Madame de la Laurière, who had let herself drop on one of the stone seats in the hall, pale and shivering. Strangely enough, it was the first meeting of these two, who might have been so nearly connected. In the midst of her wretched discomfort René's mother did not forget that, but had room for a pang of useless regret as she looked up at Clotilde's sweet face, full of sympathy. It would have been possible, no doubt. If René's parents had done their best to gain his wish for him, he might have married this charming person years ago; his mother would have been spared all the misery of his long exile in Africa, of his coming home at last a wild, restless man, caring for nothing so much as danger and adventure. wherever they were to be found.

By this time everyone in the château knew the real state of the case, and came hurrying down to welcome the refugees. Mademoiselle Jourdain at once took on herself the care of the wounded men, who were carried in one by one. Clotilde took the ladies upstairs to her own room to be warmed and dried. Thérèse was laughing and enjoying the fun of it all. Her mother was too much excited to feel fatigue, but poor Madame de la Laurière was quite overcome.

"You don't know her, child! Poor creature, she is your hero's mother," said Thérèse, mischievously. "Why do you not wait upon her while Clotilde is busy with mamma?"

Adèle flew up to Madame de la Laurière, gave her her arm, and took her carefully upstairs, chattering all the time in the sweetest manner. She helped her to change her wet clothes, rubbed her cold hands and feet, bestowed every kind of pretty attention upon her, quite undisturbed by Clotilde, who was too much taken up with Madame de Champfort and the sudden large addition to her household to have any time for sentimental recollections. Indeed she hardly realised who Madame de la Laurière was, but was only glad to see Adèle showing kindness to the poor faded woman who leaned wearily back in the arm-chair by the fire. Madame de la Laurière had just enough energy left to wonder who this lovely girl could be, and was much astonished when Adèle, kneeling at her feet, suddenly lifted her soft smiling eyes, and asked, in a low voice-

"Madame, have you good news from monsieur your son?"

"I have had no news from him at all, mademoiselle, for many days. Do you know him, may I ask?" said Madame de la Laurière.

[&]quot;Who is that lady?" said Adèle to Thérèse.

- "Oh yes, I used to know him very well."
- "Surely—I am not dreaming—it was Madame de Vaux with whom René was acquainted before he went to Africa. And you are——pardon, mademoiselle, if I am a little puzzled. The cold wind, I think, has affected my head."
- "No doubt; you were never out on such a night before," said Adèle, full of sympathy. "I am Adèle de Mornay. Monsieur René has forgotten me, most likely, but we were once great friends. I was a child when he came here, before he went to Africa, and I shall never forget the exquisite fairy-tales he used to tell me."
- "You are very amiable," said Madame de la Laurière.
- "But no, madame, I have only a little memory. In a quiet life like this, one does not forget people who are kind. Your feet are a little warmer now?"
- "A thousand thanks, mademoiselle. I cannot let you wait on me in this way. You are much too kind. I am coming to life fast. You are an angel of charity and goodness."
- "Not at all," said Adèle, laughing. "No one ever called me anything of the kind. My sister is the angel in this house."
- "Your sister is charming, but you are adorable," said Madame de la Laurière, whose wits were

returning. "Come, now, I am really quite well. You must not waste any more time on me."

"It is a very great pleasure to do anything for you, madame," replied Adèle.

Madame de la Laurière found an opportunity that night to exclaim to Thérèse on the perfections of Mademoiselle Adèle, her fairy-like beauty, her kind heart and charming manners.

"Yes; I saw that she was devoted to you," said Thérèse. "She has such a friendship for the memory of René."

"His memory, Thérèse! What do you mean?" shrieked the poor mother, catching at a chair.

"Do not derange yourself, dear madame. She remembers him, I mean, in her childhood. Yes, she is an attractive little creature."

"She is perfection," said Madame de la Laurière.
"I must talk to her again to-morrow."

"You will have plenty of time, for we shall probably be snowed up," remarked Thérèse, consolingly.



CHAPTER XVII.

AFTER THE FIGHT.

WHEN Clotilde de Vaux woke, that snowy morning, to find herself at the head of a hospital, and began the day, as usual, with prayers for her husband's safety, Adrien, after a day and night of horror, was opening his eyes on a world of pain.

The drifted snow lay in long soft wreaths across the glade where he and many of his brave comrades had fallen in covering the retreat of the main force to which they belonged. This glade ran along by the side of the narrow, twisted "route communale," by which the German cavalry and artillery were advancing. At the most advantageous point De Vaux had posted himself, with his own company and a few men belonging to Couëssin's Zouaves, resolved at any rate to hinder the enemy's advance. It was a hundred men against an army, but they fought like men in despair, with a desperate courage which

refused to listen to prudence. When one lieutenant mentioned the word "retire," De Vaux turned on him with flashing eyes—"Say that again, and I swear I will shoot you myself."

So the end of this fight was what might have been expected. They did their best for France. They all fell, with her name in their mouths, slain or terribly wounded, in the deep slush of the causeway, among the bramble-bushes and the long tangled grass, by the frozen stream, which in brighter days ran singing along the hollow. The Germans passed on in pursuit of the main body, and left these rash Frenchmen lying where they had fallen. The darkness of night came quickly and covered them; the wind rose, and wild storms of snow flew howling along the valley. By the morning, many of those poor Mobiles were buried in it.

Their leader had had his right arm torn and broken by a shot. He had also been struck in the side by a spent ball, which laid him senseless on the ground; and when he recovered a little from this shock, it was only to faint from pain and loss of blood. Coming to himself again late in the evening, he managed with his teeth and his left hand to tie a handkerchief round his arm. Then he lay down again on the cold wet earth, and remained there all night, with short intervals of feverish sleep.

In the morning, when he lifted up his head and looked round, it seemed to him that he was the only living man in that fatal glade.

There they lay, in all the sad postures of a battlefield, the brave lads of Mornay and the surrounding villages, his own farm-boys, the blacksmith's son, the miller's son, the poor lieutenant who had ventured to think of safety and prudence. Adrien hid his face for a minute or two; the sight was almost too much for his fortitude. Then he looked up again, and turned his face towards the edge of the road. There, a little apart from the others, lying as if he was asleep, with one arm thrown over the neck of his dead horse, lay one of the young men who had . joined M. de Couëssin as scouts, armed and equipped at their own expense. There were many of them, belonging to the best families in that part of France. Adrien had not seen much of them since the war began, but he now remembered how this young man had ridden up to join him with a few others the day before, in the midst of the fight-how recklessly he had ventured his life—with what enthusiasm he had shouted to the men. He was a sunburnt, spirited-looking fellow, tall and broad shouldered, with a good deal of hair upon his face, fair by contrast with a very dark skin. Now he was lying still enough, with his face turned away from Adrien, who

was suddenly seized with curiosity about him, and began to think that he must have known him before. He tried to move, found himself terribly stiff, and as weak as a child, but succeeded at last in scrambling to his feet. Then he stumbled up the sloping bank where the young man was lying, and fell on his knees beside him in the snow. He saw at once that the poor fellow was badly wounded in several places, the most disfiguring and painful wound being one in the cheek. He did not even then feel sure that he was dead, and when he tried to move him, the effort was repaid by a groan, and a slight movement of the heavy eyelids. Then, looking closely into his face, Adrien knew that it was René de la Laurière.

"How are you? Where are you hurt, my friend?" he said, his own voice strangely weak and trembling.

"Water!" murmured René, half opening his eyes.

"Voyons! That is easily said," remarked the Vicomte to himself.

Every movement was agony; but as he crawled down the hill towards the frozen stream, capturing on his way a dead Mobile's cap and musket, he comforted himself with the assurance that it was good for this terribly stiff side of his.

"The cold night has saved my life, and that young fellow's too," he said; "but I believe we are the only two living men here."

He managed to break a hole in the ice with the stock of the musket, filled the cap with water, and slowly and painfully made his way back to his companion. René could hardly speak from the wound in his face, but he looked his thanks, and also his recognition. After resting for a few minutes, Adrien crept away to examine the rest of his comrades, but failed, as he had thought, to find one living man. He then returned to René, and lay down on the grass beside him. He could do no more, and it seemed better to wait for death where he was than, by any attempt at wandering away, to fall in his helpless state into the hands of the Germans.

The poor Vicomte thought sadly of his wife and children, of his farm and his many interests. In his early campaigns, in Algeria, in the Crimea, though always a fearless soldier, he had known nothing like the war-fever which had made a hero of him yesterday. For this fighting was in defence of his home, only a few miles off—of everything he loved in the world—of everything that his soldiers loved. If the Germans were not checked here, they would march on without resistance to Champfort, to Mornay. So the wounded man lay there in agony and anxiety of mind to which his bodily pain was nothing.

The hours wore slowly on; the leaden sky lifted

a little, and a ray of sunlight glinted down the road, along which no living creature had passed since the fight ended. René, who had been lying motionless, made a sudden movement. His neighbour raised himself on his elbow and looked at him.

"Do you want anything, mon cher?—not that I can get it," he said, smiling kindly.

René frowned, and made an attempt to point down the road. There was a village, or small town, not more than a league away; they had passed through it twenty-four hours before."

"Montecroix—you——" he stammered, with pain and difficulty. "Why do you stay?"

"I could hardly walk so far," said Adrien. "It is better to stay here; we may have a chance of saving two lives—yours and mine. Some honest people may pass by this way before night."

"Or-Germans!"

"Alors"—and the Vicomte, with a slight attempt at a shrug, laid himself down again.

Another hour passed. The clouds gathered again, and a few flakes of snow began to fall. Along the road came a peasant-woman, driving her donkey-cart. She was a tall woman, with a dark, resolved face. It needed some courage for her to drive home alone to Montecroix along that road where the fighting had been only yesterday. Part of the glade,

where most of the dead soldiers were lying, was hidden from the road by bushes and low trees; but a few paces further on, this woman came to a dead horse and two men on the edge of the road. One of the men was lying prostrate, covered with cloaks, a knapsack under his head; the other rose slowly to his feet as she approached. The woman stopped her donkey with a loud "P-r-r-r-r!"

"Hé! my children, my brave Mobiles; they said you were all dead," she called out in a friendly voice; 'they told me I should meet nothing but ghosts on this road. Come, friend, get into the cart. Are you the only one left?"

"No, my good woman," said Adrien; "I have a comrade here who is badly wounded."

"Dame! he looks like it, poor boy. We must take him too, but you and I will have to walk, for my donkey is old, sauf votre respect, and one wounded man will be load enough for him. You are officers, I suppose?" she said, closely inspecting them. "What are your names? Do you belong to this country?"

"Not very far off. My name is De Vaux; he is De la Laurière. I can help you with my left arm, but the right is broken."

"We shall manage well enough," said the rescuing angel. "Stand back, my little monsieur. Now, my

child, I am going to lift you up. Put your arms round my neck. It will hurt you, but a brave fellow like you won't mind that."

De Vaux looked on in astonishment, as the woman seized Renè in her brown muscular arms, fairly lifted him, tall fellow as he was, and laid him down on the straw in her cart. He hardly knew what was happening, but before she let go, he had fainted away from the pain.

She set off at once, leading her donkey, De Vaux limping along by her side. Never had a league seemed so long. Several times he thought he must give up the effort, and lie down by the road-side, trusting to some other chance of a rescue; but with great endurance he conquered this hopeless feeling, and struggled on through the mud by the side of La Canne, as she called herself, answering as best he could her questions about the battle and himself.

In something under an hour they were in the long straggling street of Montecroix, an uncivilised, out-of-the-way village. It was reduced to the lowest depth of misery, having been occupied by the Germans so short a time before. As the Mère Canne and her donkey-cart went along the street, her neighbours called out from all sides that they were starving—that there was no food to be had in the place—no wood to make a fire.

"And what am I to do with my two poor wounded?" demanded Mère Canne.

Nobody seemed inclined to answer her. The inhabitants of Montecroix were too much wrapped up in their own misery to have any sympathy to spare for others. What was 'the good of these soldiers, some of them asked, if they could not drive away the Germans? It appeared that such fighting as theirs only made things worse.

"It is a pity the Prussians did not burn the place over your heads, ungrateful dogs!" said Mère Canne. "Well, I will take my brave wounded to my own house. I will give them a roof, if nothing else, and they shall have something to eat, till I am starved myself."

All this time the cart was slowly jolting over the uneven stones of Montecroix. It passed in front of a miserable inn, the Cheval Blanc. The landlord and two or three other men were sitting on a bench outside the door. They were deep in some argument about the war, and seemed to have forgotten cold and discomfort in the interest of their talk.

"Shall we stop at the inn?" said Adrien to his protectress.

"You will be better at my house than there, my little monsieur," answered the Mère Canne.

But one of the men on the bench suddenly got

up, taking off his hat, and came forward to Adrien, who by this time could hardly stand, and leaned against the cart-wheel for support.

"Monsieur le Vicomte de Vaux! I was wondering what had become of monsieur! He was wounded in the skirmish yesterday? Ah, what a pity! May I offer my services? What can I do?"

"Nothing, my good friend," said Adrien, faintly.

"My arm is hurt; I am bruised; that is all. But what are you doing here?"

"I often come here to sell my corn, monsieur. But the Prussians relieved me of it yesterday, so that I go back with an empty cart, and an empty purse too," said the man, with a careless smile.

This light-hearted fellow was a miller from the neighbourhood of Champfort, with whom M. de Vaux had often had large dealings.

"Ah, you were here at the wrong moment, my poor Dessin," said Adrien, kindly. "These mistakes will happen in life. After all, you can help me. Is there a doctor in Montecroix? M. René de la Laurière—you know him by name—is in the cart here, badly wounded. This good charitable person is taking us to her house. Fetch the doctor, will you, and bring him to us there."

"There is a man who calls himself a doctor, M. le Vicomte, but I will not answer for him," said Dessin. "He will be better than nobody."

The Mère Canne's house, which she spoke of so proudly, consisted of one mud-floored room and a garret. Her fireplace was empty. For furniture, she had a bed, a press, two chairs, and a table. But the heart that lived in this hovel was large enough for a palace. Dessin brought the rough country doctor, who did what he could for the wounded men, attended to René's serious wounds, and set the Vicomte's arm. Dessin stayed with them till late at night. Before he went away, he told Adrien that he was going home the next morning.

"I could take one with me," he said. "I have some empty sacks to cover him. It would be M. le Vicomte?"

He stood looking with kindly eyes at Adrien, who was sitting at that moment by René's pillow, moistening his dry lips.

- "To Champfort, do you mean?"
- "Yes, monsieur."
- "God bless you, Dessin! It will not be me. It is the one chance for M. de la Laurière—good nursing—and madame his mother is there too. It will save his life."
- "And what about M. le Vicomte? He is bad enough too."
 - "I shall do very well, my good fellow," said

Adrien, smiling. "The good mother here will take care of me for the present. Then, when my arm is strong enough for a sling, and my side hurts a little less, I shall find means of getting back to the army. There is still fighting to be done for France."

"Very well, monsieur. Then I shall come with my cart in the morning, and I will take the poor wounded gentleman as carefully as I can. One word more, monsieur. There is a report this evening that those dogs have occupied Champfort. If that is the case, I can hardly take him to the château."

"Bad news!" said the Vicomte. "Perhaps it is not true. Well, then, do your best to take him to my house, to Mornay-le-Haut. He will do well enough there."

Dessin bowed and went. La Mère Canne, tired with her adventures of the day, wrapped herself up and snored in a corner of the desolate kitchen. René had been laid on her bed, and here, by a flickering rush-candle, his comrade watched over him, forgetting his own pain in sympathy with a greater, till at last, overcome with weakness and weary suffering, he lay down on his soldier's cloak and fell into a feverish sleep.

Dessin and the cart and the doctor all arrived early in the morning. They found René quiet enough, the Vicomte in a high fever, and his wounds much worse. He was awake, but wandered in his talk, so that they could hardly understand what he said. Dessin was unwilling to leave him, but it seemed better to carry out the plan of the night before, which had pleased him so much. So René was disturbed once more, to be lifted into the miller's cart and jolted away to his friends, and Adrien was left in his unconscious suffering alone at Montecroix.





CHAPTER XVIII.

NEWS OF ADRIEN.

DESSIN drove his cart through by-ways, through country lanes with deep ruts and high sandy banks, giving Champfort and any possible Prussians as wide a berth as he could. The distance from Montecroix was about twenty miles, but his slow and roundabout way of going made it afternoon before he reached the foot of Mornay hill, and, leading his tired horse, began to climb it wearily. Fortunately, there had been very little more snow, so that the roads, though bad, were passable.

On the whole, the influx of Madame de Champfort and her people had been good for the household at Mornay. Though it might be painful in some ways to have the château turned into a hospital, it called out so much charity and patience, gave such constant employment to every one, prevented people so effec-

tually from brooding over their own anxieties, that it was really more of a blessing than a trial. These women spent their time in prayer, in encouraging each other, in tender waiting on the sufferers. Even the children took their turn, and gave their little help. The wounded men smiled and looked up when the young châtelaine walked through the midst of them, holding a child in each hand, full of quiet sympathy, with watchful eyes for every want of theirs. Adèle, kind-hearted as she was, had a shrinking dread of the wounded; she would do anything but wait on them—any needlework, or care of the children, or attention to Madame de la Laurière, who was a delicate woman, and did not at once recover from her night journey.

On the second afternoon the air was milder, and a pale, dreary sun was trying to shine. Clotilde found an opportunity to escape for an hour from her houseful of people, called the children, and walked down with them to the village of Mornay. In spite of all anxieties, these three were happy and light-hearted; they played games on the hill-side, wetting themselves all over in the most imprudent way by running into the snow-drifts that had gathered under the banks of the road. Perhaps it was the faint gleam of sunshine, like a smile from heaven on a world that fancied itself desolate—perhaps it was the rosy.

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lovely faces of the children, those dear treasures that no public misfortunes could take away, which made it no effort that afternoon for the Vicomtesse to laugh and romp a little, to follow the children's eager cries and join in their games.

But she quieted them when they reached the foot of the hill, and reminded them that they must not laugh and jump about in the village street; the poor people might have had bad news of their friends at the war. She went with them from house to house, and heard nothing certain, but quite enough to make her share in the anxiety of these poor mothers whose lads had gone with M. le Vicomte. There was a report—it was not confirmed, and nobody could tell how it reached Mornay—but still there was a report that the Mobiles of that district had been fighting. Nothing more was known.

"Madame la Vicomtesse is one of us now," said the blacksmith's wife, half tenderly, half bitterly, as she looked into Clotilde's pale face.

"Yes, my good woman. We are of one heart, like all Frenchwomen," said Clotilde.

The children were standing at the door, looking for what amusement they could find in the street. When their mother came out, Henri caught her hand, exclaiming—

"Dessin the miller has just gone by with his cart

and his old white horse. And we think he had a man in the cart, hidden under sacks."

"Yes, a man!" cried little Antoinette.

"I think he was dead, he lay so still," said Henri.

"Oh no, poor man, he shall not be dead. Perhaps he was asleep, Henri. Don't let him be dead, mamma!" exclaimed Antoinette.

"Very well, then," Henri agreed; "another poor wounded man to be nursed at Mornay."

Their mother said nothing: she took hold of their hands, and walked back very quickly through the village. When the road turned up the hill, there was Dessin's cart, going on very slowly before them.

Clotilde stopped, and stood still for a moment; then she tapped Henri impatiently on the shoulder— "Run on Henri my shild. Tell Dessin to stop

"Run on, Henri, my child. Tell Dessin to stop till I come up to him."

The boy darted away up the hill; his little sister flew after him. Madame de Vaux followed them as quickly as she could, but she was trembling all over, and felt as if her limbs would hardly support her. She saw them overtake the cart, and run up to Dessin, who was leading his horse; she saw that Henri enforced her wishes with eager, commanding gestures. Dessin looked down, and saw her coming. Then he backed the cart against the snowy bank, and stopped it there.

"But who is it?" the children were still asking, when she overtook them.

"Who is it?" she said, in a low voice, fixing her eyes on the miller's face, which was grave, as if he carried serious news. She hardly knew how she found voice to speak, for to her, as well as to Henri, that motionless figure in the cart looked like death. And why should a dead man be brought to the Château de Mornay, unless it was——

"Answer!—make haste!" cried her little son, stamping his foot. "Who have you got in the cart, Dessin? Is he dead?"

"Oh, hush, my child!" said Clotilde, drawing him to her, with her arm round his neck. "It is my husband, is it not? You have found him, and you are bringing him home."

Dessin had never seen the Vicomtesse de Vaux, and he only now realised who this lady was, standing there deadly pale, with large sad eyes fixed, and speaking low and solemnly.

"Madame la Vicomtesse?" he said, respectfully.

"Ah no, madame; it is not M. le Vicomte that I have here. I wished to bring him, but he would not let me. This is young M. de la Laurière. I was to have taken him to Champfort, but if the Germans were there I was to bring him on to Mornay, M. le Vicomte said. He was badly

wounded the day before yesterday in the fight near Montecroix."

"Mon Dieu! And where is M. de Vaux? What has happened to him?"

"Well—I am sorry to bring such bad news—but M. le Vicomte's company was totally cut to pieces that day in covering the retreat of our troops. Of all who were with him—Mobiles and a few Zouaves—it seems as if he and this gentleman were the only two left alive. A poor woman of Montecroix found them, and brought them into the village yesterday."

"But Monsieur de Vaux? Drive on, my good friend; we will walk beside you. Tell me where you left him, and why, and everything!"

So the cart was put in motion again, and rumbled slowly up the hill, while Dessin told the Vicomtesse everything. His story was hardly done when the terrace was reached, and the door.

Clotilde went into the hall, where she met Mademoiselle Jourdain.

"My child! what is the matter?" cried the good woman. "Any bad news? What is that cart?"

"Be quiet; I will tell you all presently. Call Madame de Champfort—no—yes—and Madame de la Laurière. It is René de la Laurière, wounded at Montecroix."

"Heavens! And your husband?"

"He is wounded too, but they left him there. All the rest are dead—all our poor Mobiles. Ah, this war! I wish I could die—how stupid I am—not yet. Tell them, dear mademoiselle—attend to it all. It is Dessin the miller from Champfort. I must see him before he goes away."

"Out of the way, little ones!" cried Mademoiselle Jourdain, as she rushed in search of Madame de Champfort.

The children lingered in the hall to see the wounded man brought in. Madame de Vaux went upstairs, hurrying, yet stumbling, like somebody in a dream. At the top of the stairs she met Thérèse and Adèle. Her sister threw her arms round her and stopped her.

"Clotilde, we saw you coming from the window. Who is it, darling?"

Adèle's face was pale with eager sympathy, and she spoke in a quick, frightened whisper.

Clotilde answered her, with an absent, far-away look which she did not understand—

- "It is René de la Laurière."
- "Dead?" shrieked Adèle.
- "No, petite—only wounded. He will recover," said Clotilde, quietly.

She smiled, looked lovingly at Adèle, and kissed her.

"Go, my angel," she said. "Go and comfort poor Madame de la Laurière."

Adèle was half-way downstairs in a moment, while Clotilde and Thérèse stood still in the corridor. Then she flew back, and once more caught her sister in her arms.

"Ah, forgive me, Clotilde! Is there news of Adrien?"

"Yes. He is wounded, and very ill, at the little village of Montecroix. But the good man with the cart says that he only wants careful nursing. Run away, little one; make yourself useful"—and Adèle was gone.

"What a little enthusiast!" said Thérèse, holding her friend's hand. "But has there been a battle? Where did they pick up that unfortunate René? Charles was not with him; he is at Le Mans now."

"Come this way. I will tell you all that I know," said Clotilde.

They went along the corridor to Clotilde's own room, and there she began hastily putting together a few clothes in a bag, while she talked to her friend and told her everything Dessin had said. There'se stood watching her, silent and earnest. At last she said—

"Poor M. de Vaux! How will you have news of him? And what are you packing there, Clotilde, may I ask?"

- "A few things to take with me."
- "You are going-"
- "I am going to Adrien."
- " Ma chère! how---"

But Therese's remonstrance died away on her lips. She had nothing to say, after all, against this quiet resolution, which silently ignored all obstacles. After a minute, she said, in a low voice—

- "You love your husband, Clotilde!"
- "But certainly!" replied Clotilde, with a faint smile of surprise.

Thérèse felt a little ashamed of her remark, which had slipped out almost unconsciously. She said no more, but she thought of Clotilde's weakness and delicacy, of the cold weather, the bad roads, the danger of meeting with the enemy, the hardships she would have to go through, the task of nursing a wounded man, to which she seemed so utterly It was no use representing these things to Clotilde herself, but Thérèse left the room and went downstairs to find her mother, with a vague hope that she might have authority enough to put a stop to this mad scheme. When she got downstairs, she found that everyone's head was full of her cousin René, and of the terrible news that Dessin had brought for the village of Mornay. It was impossible at first to gain Madame de Champfort's attention, and Thérèse did not trouble herself to tell Adèle, who was waiting devotedly on Madame de la Laurière.

In the meantime, Clotilde was thinking out her plan and making her arrangements. Most of the horses and carriages had been sent away to a safe distance, but in the stable-yard close to the château there was one fine, strong horse, and a favourite English dog-cart of the Vicomte's, which was well used to the rough by-roads of the country. Madame de Vaux sent for Athanase and Dessin to speak to her. The old man heard with eager delight that she wished him to go with her to Montecroix, and Dessin willingly consented to leave his own horse and cart at Mornay, and to act as coachman to the Vicomtesse.

Then Clotilde, with her maid's help, made a bundle of sheets and blankets, a down pillow, a quantity of lint and bandages, hastily dressed herself in her softest gown and warmest furs, and was just putting her hat on, when Mademoiselle Jourdain rushed into the room. The good woman's anxiety had reached the point of rage. She stormed and scolded at Clotilde for her madness, her distraction, in thus calmly proposing to commit suicide; she reproached her bitterly for her cruelty to the children, who now, poor angels, would most likely

lose father and mother both. Clotilde listened quietly and sweetly to all this.

"After all, dear mademoiselle," she said, "you have always said that one must do one's duty. Even if I did not wish to go to my husband, my first duty would be to him. As for my little children, I must leave them, I must trust——"

Mademoiselle Jourdain burst into tears, fell on her knees, and kissed Clotilde's hand.

"Forgive me, my dearest, and listen only this once. Let me go instead of you. Look at my strength compared with yours—think what a good nurse I am. I will devote myself to M. de Vaux with all my heart—you know it. Take these things off quickly, child. I am going instead of you. How can you leave Mornay? They cannot spare you. Madame, madame, help me to convince her!"

Clotilde stood in her winter wrappings before the whole family, who came hurrying in after mademoiselle. This faithful old friend remained on her knees, clasping Clotilde's hand, while Adèle and Madame de Champfort poured out entreaties, arguments, all to prove that M. de Vaux himself, good, unselfish man, would be enraged at the idea of his wife's leaving Mornay. Clotilde smiled; a look almost of happiness came into her face.

"You know him very well," she said. "But he

must not always have his own way, do you see, my friends."

"Do not say any more to her, mamma; she is right," said Thérèse. "If I were you, my Clotilde, I hope I should do the same."

While these arguments were going on, the children came peeping into the room, and ran up to their mother, who held them in a long embrace.

"Henri," she said, "poor papa is wounded, and I am going to nurse him. You don't want me to stay at home—you and Antoinette?"

"No, no, little mamma," said Henri, hiding his face on her shoulder. "I saw them getting the dog-cart ready, and Athanase said he was going with you. We came to ask if we might go to dear papa too. We would make no noise, and be so useful. Might we?"

"No, my sweetest. You must be very good, and stay with Aunt Adèle."

The Vicomtesse had another trial to go through before she was allowed to start on her snowy journey. As she crossed the hall, Madame de Champfort beckoned her into the library, where a bed had been hastily made up for René de la Laurière. His wounds had been dressed, and he was lying all bandaged and pale, too weak to move, but with his eyes open, and smiling at his mother, who sat watching beside him. Adèle

followed the others into the room, stole round, and stood behind Madame de la Laurière. Clotilde walked up to the wounded man, her eyes suddenly veiled with tears. In this wreck, this bandaged face, this haggard brow with its lines of pain, it was hard to recognise the bright young René of years ago. Only his blue eyes shone with a sudden light and sweetness as he looked up at her.

"You will be better soon," she said, very softly.
"I shall tell my husband. I am going to him."

"He cannot answer you—he must not speak," murmured Madame de la Laurière.

But René would speak. His words were so indistinct that Clotilde had to stoop down to hear them, but she did hear them very well.

"Madame, your husband is a hero. He saved my life."

A few minutes later, Clotilde was sitting beside Dessin in the dog-cart, with Athanase behind, driving down the hill, through the wailing village, whose news had reached it only too soon, along the endless lanes, with their banks and deep ruts of mud and snow. Dessin talked to the horse, who trotted along bravely, as if he knew he was going to his master. Clotilde was silent, shivering now and then in the cold, raw air. They left the sunset behind them, a long orange line under a curtain of grey.



CHAPTER XIX.

A SNOWY NIGHT AT MONTECROIX.

THE most civilised person in the commune of Montecroix was its curé, Gilles Fronteau, a clever and honest young man, who wasted much energy and eloquence upon a very hopeless set of villagers. He was not discouraged, for he really loved his sordid flock, and he felt that his work was carried on under the ever-watchful eyes of the Bishop, who some day, when Montecroix had shown itself thoroughly unworthy of him, would take him up, and set him down in a happier sphere of work. So he preached earnest, out-spoken sermons, and marched about the village with his thick shock of brown hair under his broad hat, with a stout stick in his hand, and a large curly dog at his heels. The worst characters took no liberties with Monsieur le

Curé, and those who were in trouble went to him naturally.

After the fight near Montecroix, this worthy priest's first step was to bury the dead, which he did with the help of his sexton and one or two welldisposed villagers. Then he turned his thoughts to the living, only represented, alas! by M. de Vaux. The Curé would not hear of his remaining in the Mère Canne's wretched house, and, without offending her, got the sick man successfully removed to the presbytère, his own humble little white dwelling close to the church. The doctor considered this move dangerous, but agreed with M. Fronteau that it was the poor Vicomte's best chance. He was very ill; his wounds were inflamed and in a terrible state. from neglect and over-exertion at first. Without being in an actual high fever, he was feverish and not himself, partly from the pain he suffered, which was very great. The good Curé and his sturdy peasant housekeeper nursed him carefully night and day, and Carabas, the Curé's dog, took his part in the watching, sitting at the foot of the Vicomte's bed and staring at him for hours.

This presbytère was a very narrow, cramped little place. The front door, which was partly glazed, opened straight into the kitchen, a low room with a red-tiled floor and carved cupboards, the rest of the

furniture very bare and simple. On the left there was a door into the Curé's study, with a window looking to the back, across a small garden and part of the churchyard. This room also had a tiled floor; it held a crucifix, some book-shelves, two rush chairs, and a table. At the back of the kitchen, near the fireplace, the staircase went up into the Curé's bedroom, a large bare room filling the whole space. Downstairs, behind the kitchen, and also entered from it, there was a back room, a sort of lean-to, with a long sloping roof, where Josephine, the housekeeper, did her rough work by day, and slept by night in a small low bed covered with green baize. Outside, the house was rather picturesque; it ran up in one high gable to the street, and was roofed with red tiles and overrun by the strong twisting stems of a vine, now all leafless and brown. The Curé, of course, established his patient in his own room and bed, sleeping himself on the floor beside him. Carabas kept his own place on a mat behind the door, his head on his outstretched paws.

The Vicomte's removal took place towards evening, on the very day that Dessin conveyed René de la Laurière to Mornay; and as it was on that same afternoon that the Vicomtesse started for Montecroix with her two companions, she might have been expected, without accidents, to arrive there before

midnight, so that M. Fronteau would soon have found his work as sick-nurse at an end. But that night, and all the next day, passed without any arrival at the presbytère.

About nine o'clock in the evening a storm of sleet was flying against the window. It was Saturday; the Curé had finished his preparation for the next day, and was sitting beside his poor feverish patient, who had been talking to himself in an indistinct wandering way, saying many names, which the watcher supposed to be those of his family. Suddenly he started violently, and sat upright in bed.

"Yes," he cried out, "I told you so. She loves me. She loves me best!"

"Who ever doubted it, my dear monsieur!" said the Curé, consolingly, as he seized him in his strong arms and laid him down again.

Adrien stared at him, and was silent. Carabas rose up with a short sharp bark from his lair behind the door.

"Hush!" said his master. The dog trotted off downstairs, growling as he went. The next minute. through the howling of the wind and the beating of the snow, M. Fronteau's sharp ears caught a knocking at the kitchen door.

"Not the Prussians again! nor Mobiles wanting quarters! No, the knocking is too gentle for either

of them," he reflected. "Some one who knows that we have a sick man here."

Josephine's sabots clattered across the bricks as she went to open the door. There was a rush of howling weather that seemed to fill all the house; then the low, hurried talking of several voices. Quick, uncertain steps came up the stairs, following the steady tread of Josephine, who put her head into the room and said in a cautious, awe-struck sort of voice-" Monsieur le Curé, here is madame arrived." The Curé rose up from his place beside Adrien's pillow, as a young woman he had never seen before passed Josephine and came into the room. She was a melancholy object, drenched with melted snow, half white with that which had just fallen. She had nothing on her head but damp, trailing locks of hair, which had partly fallen down on her shoulders. Her eyes were bright and very hollow, and her cheeks were burning red. The stout young Curé was amazed and terrified at her appearance, which, in the dimly-lighted room, looked even wilder than it really was. She looked up into his face, as he stood between her and his patient, smiled, and made him a little inclination.

"I have been looking everywhere for my husband, monsieur," she said, "and the good woman who saved him has brought me to your house.' -



"SHE SANK ON HER KNEES BESIDE THE BED."

"Madame la Vicomtesse de Vaux?" said the Curé, bowing.

"Yes. How is he?"

She glided on to the bed, bent over Adrien, and kissed him. He murmured something, but hardly seemed to know her.

"He seems very ill," she said, looking round at M. Fronteau. "I must sit up with him, but first I will change my things. We have had such a very wet journey."

"A terrible journey, madame," said the Curé.
"Will you allow my housekeeper to help you? It is neither good for him nor for you that you should remain near him in your wet clothes."

"You are quite right, monsieur. But, after all, wet or dry, one is come to the end of it, and indeed I was in despair. But will he get well? Are there any doctors in this village? What have you done for him, monsieur? and is he very seriously wounded? Mon Dieu! I see he does not know me."

As she finished speaking, her voice rose into a sort of scream and sob. The Curé and Josephine, side by side, had been watching her wonderingly, her manner all through striking them as strange and unnatural, in all its gentleness. Now she sank slowly down on her knees beside the bed, and hid her face in the clothes.

- "Is there anybody with her?" said the Curé to Josephine.
 - "An old man-a servant."
 - "Stay here a moment while I speak to him."

The Curé went downstairs with a cloud on his brow. He thought this poor young Vicomtesse might as well have stayed at her château. In the kitchen he found Athanase, his best livery soaked to a sponge. He and Dessin were helping each other to tell a long story to Mère Canne and several other neighbours who had dropped in.

"Voyons, good people," said the Curé; "it is time for you to go home to your beds. Be at ease, La Canne; only go home, my good woman. You may come in the morning, and Josephine will tell you all the news. Now, friends, do you hear what I say?"

There was a decision about the Curé which admitted of no question or delay. Off went the visitors, Dessin with them, Athanase alone remaining.

"Your master is very ill," said the Curé to Athanase, "but with great care he will recover. I could have nursed him through it well enough. Madame la Vicomtesse should have stayed at home. She is not fit to travel in the snew, and my house is not large enough to hold any more people. When did you start? This afternoon, I suppose. Pretty weather for a lady!"

"No, indeed!" said Athanase, indignantly; "Monsieur le Curé is quite mistaken if he thinks that Madame la Vicomtesse would have waited a whole day after hearing the news. We started yesterdayvesterday afternoon, and after what we have gone through, the wonder is that she is alive. We started in a comfortable carriage, with M. le Vicomte's favourite horse; but we had not gone three leagues when those brigands rode out upon us from a wood, and requisitioned the horse and carriage, and the blankets and pillows that madame was bringing with her, and turned her out, poor little heavenly angel, to walk in the snow! That was in the evening. She walked till she could walk no longer, and we spent the night, Monsieur le Curé, under the shelter of a pile of logs-yes, logs-and she the grand-daughter of M. le Comte de Mornay. Bien! We rose up in the morning-monsieur understands that the country is so overrun with those dogs that we dared not venture into any house or village."

"Yes, my good friend," said M. Fronteau. "Make your story as short as you can, for I have left madame half-fainting upstairs."

"Short—oh, with the greatest pleasure!" said Athanase, shrugging his shoulders. "We walked on again, and that noble lady never said she was tired or starving, though she was both, for those wolves in human shape took even the little basket of provisions that I was prudent enough to put in the carriage, foreseeing some such accident as this—or at least thinking, from M. Dessin's account, that there would be no food to be had at Montecroix."

"Yes, yes, advance. Let us arrive at Montecroix," said the Curé, with a shrug in his turn.

"Monsieur does not wish to hear our adventures now. So be it! In the middle of the day we were overtaken by a worthy acquaintance of M. Dessin's, with his donkey-cart—two excellent donkeys. that we made the rest of the journey, through such roads and such weather as I, an old man, do not remember in France. But times are changed, Monsieur le Curé. And-we went first to the good woman's cottage—and she guided us here. here, it seems to me, we shall all find our graves. Oh, my little madame—her feet all wet and bruised, her pretty hat blown off into the snow and the darkness-what would they have said at Mornay if they could have seen us toiling through that wood! And our good Tancrède gone too-the best horse in France! Ah, this is war!" The old servant laid his head down on his arms and sobbed.

"Courage, my friend!" said the Curé, going up to him and laying his hand kindly on his shoulder. "Be thankful that madame's guardian angel has brought you safe through all these troubles. You will be very useful here, if you will rouse yourself, and do as I ask you."

"I am at Monsieur le Curé's service," said Athanase, almost springing to his feet.

"Very well. My housekeeper is occupied with madame. Dry yourself, boil that kettle, warm the soup in that pot, fetch bread and wine from the cupboard yonder—get supper ready, in fact. I leave you to it."

"Monsieur, I am an excellent cook," said Athanase.

"When I was a young man, before I entered M. le Comte's service——"

"So much the better," said the Curé, with a wave of his hand. "But my soup will hardly be acceptable to any but hungry people, no matter how artistically it is warmed up. You are hungry?"

"As a wolf, monsieur."

" Make haste, then."

The Curé's calm resoluteness, which thus set Athanase to work, forgetful of his hardships, soon had the same effect on Madame de Vaux. It was true that the Curé was secretly afraid of her; he had never been brought into contact with great ladies; but she hardly looked that character now, this dishevelled, muddy, weary creature. It was perhaps, however, the good M. Fronteau's doubt

of his power over such a being which made him speak to her almost roughly, when he came back into the room and saw her still on the floor beside her husband.

"May I ask, madame, why you came here?" he said, standing at a little distance from her.

She moved, got up hastily, and stood trembling, with her hand on Adrien's pillow. She now looked more like one of the objects of the Curé's dread.

"Why I came here!" she repeated. "What a question! I heard that my husband was wounded, and lying here. Is not that reason enough?"

"Then you came to nurse your husband?"

"Certainly, monsieur!"

"If I might differ with you, I should say that you came here to be ill yourself."

"No, I am not going to be ill; I have not time," she said, smiling so sweetly that the Curé felt inclined to beg her forgiveness.

"I am sure, madame," he said, "that you wish to do your best for Monsieur de Vaux. But I can only allow you to nurse him on one condition."

"Monsieur!"

"Pardon me, madame. It is that you obey me to-night."

"And what are your orders? I am in your house,

and very grateful to you; but you must not be unreasonable."

"For your husband's sake, madame, I ask you to go downstairs now, to allow my housekeeper to help you into dry clothes, to eat something, and then to go at once to bed. Then possibly you may not be ill; but after what I have heard of your journey——"

"You will not let me sit up to-night?"

"Madame, in your state of fatigue it would be madness. You can trust him to Josephine and me."

"Well, it is true that I am very tired," said Clotilde. "Trust him to you—ah, yes! your charity and goodness must be tried a little further. But, to tell you the truth," she said, looking into his honest face, and smiling in answer to the sympathy she found there, "I am rested already—more rested than I have been for months. Ah! you do not know how much certainty is better than suspense."

"Josephine, show madame the way downstairs," said the Curé.

Clotilde kissed Adrien once more, and wished him good-night. Then she went slowly downstairs, leaning on Josephine's strong arm. Josephine was a square, plain, elderly woman, with a gruff manner which made her some enemies in Montecroix, but as kind a heart as her master's own. Clotilde, in spite of her terrible exhaustion, was almost happy

when this good woman brought her down into the kitchen, where Athanase was bustling about. He came and kissed her hand, and then, with almost tearful reverence, received the poor wet boots and stockings from Josephine, and took them to the fire to dry. Josephine made her master's study into a dressing-room for the Vicomtesse, and presently brought her out of it in her own best Sunday clothes, her dark-blue gown and stiff white frills and thick, brown, knitted stockings. These things hung like bags on Clotilde's slight figure, and caused Josephine to remark grimly that one human being was shaped differently from another. Athanase paid his compliments in a more marked fashion.

"But here is madame transformed into a peasant! If such a thing could be possible, one would say she was more charming than ever."

Poor Clotilde herself, as she sat by the fire, and tried, as a duty, to swallow one or two spoonfuls of the Curé's cabbage soup, was getting over the first excitement of her arrival, and wondering what would happen next. As far as resolution would go, she was firmly resolved not to be ill. She was coughing and shivering, her bones were aching, and all her sensations were perfectly wretched; but these things must be conquered; for Adrien's sake, ill she must not be. She sat dreaming over the fire, waited

on with chattering devotion by Athanase, till at last Josephine came and carried her off into the study, where she had made a bed for her, and there, under the humble roof of the little *presbytère*, Clotilde lay down and slept. The fortune of war might have brought her into a much worse place.

There was good news and a joyful welcome waiting for her in the morning. That night, as M. Fronteau watched in the sick-room, his patient suddenly woke from a short sleep, and began asking questions quite rationally, though in a weak, confused way. He wanted to know where he was, and what had happened. The Curé, in a grave, matter-of-fact voice, explained everything.

- "Ah! And do you know who I am?" said Adrien.
- "You are the Vicomte de Vaux, and you live at Mornay."
 - "Who told you?"
- "The good fellow Dessin, who took your companion away."
- "They will hear about me at Mornay," said the Vicomte. "I hope he will not frighten them with a bad account. I shall be well in a few days, shall I not?—able to rejoin the army?"
- "I can hardly tell yet, monsieur," replied the Curé

Perhaps his tone was not very encouraging, for Adrien sighed. Presently he said—

"I am a fortunate man, Monsieur le Curé. I have more to live for than many people. My wife is a charming person, and I have two pretty little children."

"You have to recover for them, monsieur, as well as for France."

"Ah, poor France! And my brave village lads—that is grief enough for a lifetime. But mark my words—they think they have crushed France, but they little know her real strength. She is the greatest still. Some day the world will know—perhaps not till the flag is white again—I never liked those three colours myself. Monsieur, some day I shall bring my wife to see you and thank you. Poor child! anxiety is wearing her out. Have you heard whether the Germans occupied Champfort?"

"Yes," said the Curé, "that report was true."

"Ah, then, Dessin took him to Mornay; they will have something to do, and will not think too much of me. I had a blessed dream not long ago—I do not know when. I dreamed that my wife had arrived here—was it not droll? She stood beside me, she kissed my forehead, she spoke to me tenderly. Her hair touched my face; it was all hanging down damp on her shoulders. One dreams impossible

things, for she could not come through this weather, and with all those German troops between. I could not even wish it, you understand, for she is young, and as fragile as a leaf; a breath of cold wind would blow her away from us."

"Still, among those delicate women one often finds the most heroic," said the Curé, gently. "It would not so much astonish me if Madame de Vaux was to find means of reaching you, when she hears of your state."

"Ah, no—impossible," said the Vicomte. "I know more than you do, Monsieur le Curé. I know how much there is to keep her at home. She has many duties there, do you see. No, no, she cannot come; but heaven knows that I am glad to have her, even in a dream."

"You would be still more glad, however, to have madame in reality?"

"My good monsieur, you torment me a little. What is the use of saying that?"

"Forgive me, and try to sleep again," said the Curé.

He rightly judged that the knowledge of Clotilde's being in the house would keep his patient awake all night. As it was, the good Vicomte was soothed and comforted by talking about her, and fell once more into a quiet sleep, from which he only woke,

early in the morning, to find that his supposed dream had come true, and that Clotilde herself was watching by him, pale and calm and sweet.

M. Fronteau left the room at his patient's first movement, feeling that such a waking was sacred. Only Clotilde saw the tears that rolled down Adrien's rough, worn face, and the smile of perfect content, with just a shadow of surprise, that lighted it up into beauty.





CHAPTER XX.

A NEW ARRANGEMENT.

THE people of Montecroix, though rough and miserable, were not insensible to the influences of beauty, refinement, and goodness. Clotilde de Vaux, strange creature as she was to them, soon made herself a familiar friend in many of their houses. Whenever she was not with her husband, she was in the village, pitying and helping those whose trouble sprang from the same source as her own, often followed by Athanase with a large basket, for, as soon as the roads were a little more safe, constant supplies were sent to her from Mornay. She was not ill, though she looked like a shadow, and was only supported by the anxious excitement which made her eyes and cheeks unnaturally bright. Adrien did not recover quickly. Weeks passed while he still lay, full of pain and fever and weakness, in the Curé's upper room, and his wife nursed him with a patient devotion which never flagged.

One day in February, after the armistice was signed, a carriage drove into the village of Montecroix and stopped at the presbytère. Madame de Champfort and Thérèse were come to visit their exiled friends, and to tell them that they were going to return to Champfort, now that the Germans had left it. All the wounded men at Mornay were well enough to be removed, except René de la Laurière; he and his mother must ask for hospitality a little longer. Both Adrien and Clotilde were ready to say that they were very welcome. After a time, when Clotilde thought that her husband had talked enough, she took her friends downstairs into the Curé's study, which that good man had given up to her.

"My dear child, you are wonderful!" said Madame de Champfort, affectionately. "Where did you learn to be such an excellent nurse? Adrien is indeed the most fortunate man in France."

"He is the best patient in France," said Clotilde.

"He bears all my little awkwardnesses like a saint.

Dear madame, I have only learnt by instinct, and I make many mistakes. But, thank heaven, he goes on recovering."

Madame de Champfort sat in the Curé's chair, and

looked round the little bare place, and listened with tears in her eyes while Clotilde questioned Thérèse about the children, about Adèle.

"Ah, my dear," she suddenly interrupted, "I thought we might have brought Adèle with us to-day, but I had not the heart to tear her away from Marie de la Laurière. There is a sort of adoration between those two, is there not, Thérèse?"

"It is perfectly ridiculous," said Therese, nodding and smiling. "One would think the little thing was Marie's own daughter, from the affection they show each other."

Clotilde looked up, and met Madame de Champfort's eyes full and earnestly. The elder woman had been smiling a little mischievously, but her smile died away before that serious gaze.

"Please remember," said Clotilde, gently, "that I have been in the place of Adèle's mother all our lives. Have you anything more to tell me, madame?"

"My child," said Madame de Champfort, with a shade of confusion, "you know as much about Adèle herself as I do. You saw her little enthusiasm before you left us, the sudden fancy that seized her for Madame de la Laurière. What more do you wish me to tell you, dear Clotilde?"

"I should like to know all the truth," said Clotilde, "for I see there is something more."

"Well," said Madame de Champfort, "Marie spoke to me in confidence—but it is perhaps right that you should know. One wonders that her poor son should think of such things in his present helpless state, with his beauty gone for ever; but she is, of course, charmed at the idea of such an end to all his wild wanderings. The fact is, dear Clotilde, he earnestly wishes to marry Adèle. He spoke to his mother about it, but she has not breathed a word to Adèle, or to anyone but me."

There was a moment of silence. There'se glanced at Clotilde, and then turned her head, and stared out of the window. Her mother sat looking at Clotilde with deep interest and a kind of quiet confidence. She did not believe in romance, and felt convinced in her own mind that this young woman, once such a determined victim to it, was only too glad to forget the past, and would not now change her fate for any other, if she could. She was right in the main. Clotilde had made her sacrifice, and perhaps had never really repented of it; at any rate, she had done her duty to the utmost. Yet those young days when René made love to her were not so long ago but that this news, half-expected as it was, gave her a sudden and sharp pain at heart. It would have seemed only natural that René should marry some other woman at a distance—but Adèle, her own little sister! It was strange, somehow, and sad. She sat looking down for a minute or two. Her feeling had at once betrayed itself to Thérèse, but not to Madame de Champfort, less quick-eyed and sympathetic. Her manner was only a little graver than usual when she spoke.

"It is hardly a time to talk of such things now, is it, dear madame? But when we have peace, and are at home again, and M. de la Laurière is well—when we have time to breathe—if Adèle wishes it herself, Adrien and I will have nothing to say. We should be a little connected with your family; that is a pleasant thought."

"Merci, mon ange!" said Madame de Champfort.

From the day that the two girls, so entirely different in everything, had first met at Champfort when the Bishop was there, they had loved and understood each other, and of late years this friendship had deepened. Before they parted on this day at Montecroix, Clotilde found a moment to look, smiling, into Thérèse's expressive eyes, and say, "Tell me, do you think our little Adèle would be happy with your cousin René?"

"My dear, I always hated men," answered Thérèse.

"But the little fool worships him, and I suppose he is not worse than others."

She laughed, and left her friend with an affectionate embrace.

Peace was signed at the beginning of March. Poor sad France began to breathe again under sweet spring skies, the valleys were white with cherry blossom, the willows and the elder bushes were budding; there was a noise of singing birds and running water in the mournful, desolated country. On one of those calm, sunshiny days, Adrien and Clotilde went back to Mornay. There were no rejoicings, but groups of people gathered to see them pass, and to say a word of welcome to their good friend the Vicomte.

The grand old château stood there on its hill, untouched by invaders. The afternoon sun on its many windows flashed a welcome, which Adrien pointed out to his wife with a smile. On the terrace, Adèle and the children and their faithful Mademoiselle Jourdain were waiting for them. They were received with glad hearts and hushed voices, and even a few tears, for in the deepest joy of reunion French people could not forget France.

It was one of those rare, lovely evenings that sometimes come in spring, making one forget all the cold winds and harsh weather that too often divide March from June. The sun had set cloudlessly, and

the moon was rising, broad and full, with almost the red glow of harvest, behind the eastern trees. Slowly she climbed the sky, and sent longer and longer rays down the valley, across the hill-side, along the silent terraces of Mornay. Adèle was standing at one of the salon windows, with her hands clasped, gazing out into the evening. It was a strange thing for her to be still and thoughtful. Perhaps she was thinking of Clotilde's thin cheeks and hollow eyes, and the little cough, which seemed to warn them not to be too happy, not to be too sure that out of their own small circle they had given no dear victim to the war. Perhaps she missed those friends who had gone away only a few days before—the lady who loved her so much—the pale, scarred hero who hobbled on sticks to the carriage. They were only gone to La Girouette, but it certainly seemed as far away as Paris. Adèle may also have been thinking of a letter, a large and thick one, which had arrived that very day from the elder M. de la Laurière, addressed to M. de Vaux, and had been laid on the library table to wait for him. Altogether, there were several grave subjects to occupy that bright little mind.

After dinner, Clotilde had followed Adrien into the library.

That letter must have been read and talked

over by this time, whatever it was. Yes, and now the library door was opening, Clotilde's step, light and slow, was coming across the hall, the curtain moved at the door, and she came forward into the soft light of the shaded lamp, advancing to her sister with a sweet, grave smile. For a moment they stood together at the window, and then Clotilde sat down in a low chair, and Adèle was instantly on the floor beside her, leaning her head against her, as she used to do in her childish days not so very long ago.

"You were not angry with me, dearest, for leaving you for so long?" said Clotilde, stroking her sister's dark hair.

"Angry! oh, Clotilde! Adrien wanted you most. And nobody could do too much for a hero like him. Monsieur René told me all about the battle, and what Adrien did afterwards. How nobly he behaved! Shall I tell you?"

"Yes, tell me."

Adèle had the whole history quite perfect, but it was plain that besides Adrien there was another hero concerned. She went on to talk about Madame de la Laurière—to tell Clotilde what a charming person she was, and how much she loved her.

"She is as good to me as you yourself, Clotilde, nearly. She likes everything I do and everything I wear, and she likes to hear me sing, or read, or talk.

I do assure you she is adorable. You would love her too, if you knew her."

"No doubt I should. I do now, a little, because she loves you."

"Is it not strange that we should not have known her when we were young, when Monsieur René used to come here so much with his fairy tales! It seems to me now that he was not so happy in those days. He says now that it is happiness enough to live. But I remember then, he was very sad one day, and he said life was nothing but a desert."

"People change their minds, fortunately," said Clotilde. "But René does want something more to make him happy besides the fact of living. My little one, Adrien has had a letter from his father, asking for—for you——"

Clotilde's voice died away into a faint whisper. She clasped Adèle's hand tight, stooped, and laid her cheek against the girl's soft hair.

Adèle did not speak. She was glad to have her face turned away from the light, for she was half ashamed of the sudden thrill of joy that made her blush and tremble. She knew pretty well before that René loved her. He had almost told her so himself before he went away, and his mother had hinted it as broadly as she dared—but this letter from his father made everything real. As she sat

there in her dream of bliss, she little knew that Clotilde's one thought was intense thankfulness. No barrier, even in fancy, need rise up between her and her little sister, because of the care with which she had hidden that old love-story from the child. No shadow should fall across this bright young romance of Adèle's; her hero should be all her own; and, after all, René had done nothing wrong. It was in every way natural and right that he should forget that first love of his, and it was no wonder, lying wounded at Mornay, that he should have lost his heart to the sweet, enthusiastic girl, with her lovely face and bright, graceful ways, who was so ready to remember her old friend, and to devote herself to him through his mother.

"Clotilde, what did Adrien say?" Adèle whispered at last.

"He said René was brave and good. We always meant, both of us, to let you decide for yourself, as Antoinette shall, when she grows up. So it is in your own hands, darling."

"What did M. de la Laurière say?"

"You shall see the letter. He could not put off writing, because René was so anxious, that it delayed his getting well. So I think—don't you?—that we must send our answer to-morrow. Adrien said the wound in his face would spoil him, but I

suppose that would not make much difference to you?"

"Is Adrien himself spoilt by having his arm in a sling?" said Adèle, with a proud little laugh. "No, my dear. Madame de la Laurière was grieving about it, and I told her that a scar always made a man handsomer. She laughed so much, but I think she was pleased, and agreed with me, really."

"No doubt. But still—about your answer—think seriously, little one, for it is a great thing."

"Clotilde—my sister—I have belonged to you always. Tell me—should you be glad?"

"If it makes you happy, my angel—yes, very glad."

"Then, yes!"

Presently a slow, heavy tread came downstairs. It was Mademoiselle Jourdain, who had been seeing the children safely off to sleep in their two little white cots. She came into the salon, and found her two elder children sitting there by the window with their arms round each other.

"Tell her," Adèle whispered; and Clotilde beckoned to Mademoiselle Jourdain to sit beside them, and told her this great news in a few gentle words.

The good woman did not seem much surprised, and took it with resignation.

"Be good, my dear Adèle," she said, "and you

will deserve to be happy. Be a noble woman, like your sister, and always think of the comfort and happiness of others before your own."

"Pardon, dear mademoiselle, she must think of her own now," said Clotilde, smiling.

"Ah! bien! it is a strange world," said Mademoiselle Jourdain. "What would monsieur your grandfather have said? I have been thinking much of him lately, and of that wonderful book of his. What a pity it was never finished!—it might have helped us now."

"It was not about marriages, mademoiselle?" said Adèle, in a very low voice.

"My dear child, do you suppose that any persons in France, except you and M. René de la Laurière, are thinking of marriages at this moment?" answered Mademoiselle Jourdain with some sharpness.

Adèle shrugged her shoulders and was silent.

"Let us look forward to this time next year," said Clotilde. "A year of peace—it is like a fairy tale. This time next year! We shall all be happy—we shall have forgotten our troubles, and France will be beginning to smile again. Henri and Antoinette will be able to read—our dear, brave wounded will be quite strong again—all sorts of pleasant things will have happened—only I shall have lost you, my Adèle—my child."

Adèle smiled, took her sister's hand, and laid her cheek against it.

"Oh no, Clotilde!" she whispered; "you will not have lost me at all. And he will love you so much, dearest."

Clotilde smiled too, but did not answer. She was gazing straight out into the spring moonlight, which now flooded the terrace and the valley.

Mademoiselle Jourdain sat silently in the background. She remembered many things, and she looked at her two children with a softened heart through a sudden mist of tears.

In the year 1872, I was staying in the west of France with an English friend of mine, who, having married a Frenchman, had thrown herself heart and soul into the study of her adopted people and country. Through her I came to know many family histories, few of which struck me as more characteristic than the one I have told here.

She said that, though Madame de Vaux might be a peculiar type, it was impossible to see much of the best class of Frenchwomen without being aware of the touch of melancholy, of disenchantment, the sentiment of an unrealised dream, which shades the background of their gaiety and sweet kindheartedness. Life, to them, is so seldom what it might be. They often, generally, make the best of wives to the men they did not choose; they are devoted to their children. Their lives are ruled by principle and religion, and their gentle thoughts seldom or never go astray. Yet there is something wanting, and it is too late to supply it now. If you asked them, not one in ten could tell you what it was.

"I should like to know the end of that story of Clotilde de Vaux," I said. "It seems as if it broke off in the middle; that is the worst of stories from real life."

"I cannot tell you the end of the story, but I think it will be better than the beginning. Clotilde's life is no longer in twilight; it grows brighter every day. The love between her and her husband goes on deepening, and the children are more to them both year by year."

"And René de la Laurière married Adèle?"

"Yes, they were married early in this year. The other day I went to Mornay, and found the whole family keeping a little festival. It was Clotilde's wedding-day. The children had made a sort of throne for her and their father under the old cedar on the terrace. There they sat, all surrounded with flowers, the dear Vicomte radiant with content.

Clotilde's eyes were wet, but she was smiling and happy. René and Adèle were there. They are very much in love with each other, but they had found time and thoughts to dress the children up in the prettiest little costumes, and to teach them a song to sing to their father and mother. So there were the little things, rather afraid of themselves and their song, each carrying a nosegay of flowers as large as itself, with Adèle behind them as prompter, and Monsieur René laughing on the grass in the background. If you could have seen him, you would not have believed in the story I have just been telling you."

"And under the old cedar, too!" said I.

"Under the old cedar. But one must not be too sentimental. I do not believe that Clotilde would change things now, if she could go back to her girlhood again—in fact, I am sure she would not. She is a happy woman, that dear neighbour of mine."

"There is something to be said, then, for a mariage de convenance," said I, after a little meditation.

"My dear," replied she, "one must try to look at things without prejudice. It is not likely that the custom of a great old country like France, carried on for centuries, is altogether and hopelessly bad. Some of the rash marriages that young people make in England, against prudence and obedience and everything else——"

When my friend once begins on a subject that interests her, she has a great flow of words. We discussed French and English marriages for a long time, without coming to any quite positive conclusion. But, after what she had told me, before our argument began, about the shade of sadness in the life of a Frenchwoman, I thought I might fairly claim to have the best of it. And I wished, and wish still, that my gentle Clotilde de Mornay had been an English girl.



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ON

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